



Highland Savior

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Highland Savior

By

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This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any actual person, living or dead, is purely coincidental, since the characters herein exist only in the mind of the author. All events are fictional. Inverness, Loch Ness, Fort Augustus and Fort William are real places in the Highlands of Scotland. Dumbarton, Dumbarton Castle, Renton, Glasgow, Greenock, the islands of Cumbrae, Little Cumbrae, Bute, Arran and the River Clyde are all real, Castle Mhor and Castle Fraser are not. This book is for entertainment purposes only.



When Rosina Buchanan gets married to the dashing Alasdair McPhail, she has no idea she has wed an abusive monster. On their wedding night she kills him in self defense after he tries to rape her. She is helped by the dour and disliked Laird Logan Fraser, who arranges the murder scene to look like a robbery. But soon someone is spreading rumors that Logan had committed the killing and he is soon a wanted man. After fleeing to the Highlands, he and Rosina fall in love.

Meanwhile Connor, Alasdair's brother has arranged to marry a beautiful Frenchwoman called Monique, but she has a passion for Rosina's father Hugh, which is returned. Will Connor take revenge?

And will Logan be able to clear his name?

Lady Rosina Buchanan thought that Alasdair McPhail was the most charming, handsome man she had ever seen. He had luxuriant dark brown hair and dark gray eyes with laugh lines around them, an aquiline nose and a mouth that seemed almost about to twitch into a smile. He wasn't as tall as Logan Fraser, but then few men were. But Fraser had never shown any interest in her and was known for his introverted, sullen nature, whereas Alasdair was bright, charming, witty and intelligent. She couldn't wait to be married to him, be with him every day, and have his children. She wondered if they would have her dramatic coloring of ginger-red hair and brown eyes or be dark like Alasdair's Spanish ancestors. She did not know if those tales about his forebears were true, but they added to his attraction in her eyes. He was considerably older than she was and had been married before, but his wife had died of scarlet fever twelve years before. His two children, a boy, and a girl were now married and had homes of their own, and he saw very little of them.

She stood at the window of her bedroom in the Castle of Dumbarton looking across at the majestic River Clyde flowing past on its way to the sea. Alasdair McPhail had lost his own stately home when his father and he had had a major disagreement resulting in an estrangement between them. The quarrel had never been forgotten or forgiven by either side. When his father died he bequeathed it to his younger son with along with most of his estate, apart from the town house where Alasdair now lived. Alasdair still mourned the loss of the castle, and could never understand why his father had done such a

thing since it completely went against custom and tradition. He was given an adequate allowance though, and could still live in considerable comfort in his town house. It was well known that he and Connor, his junior by five years, despised each other. Rosina had begged Connor to come to the wedding, writing him letter after letter, but apart from a short, terse response to the first one, she had heard nothing. She despised him for being a heartless coward.

Their courtship had begun when her late mother's friend, Lady Melrose of Kirkintilloch, had arranged a ball to celebrate the anniversary of her thirty years of marriage to her husband, Laird David. Rosina had noticed the dark, attractive man with the mischievous smile and melodic laugh straight away. He was the most handsome man in the room and no other man could hold a candle to him. She was overjoyed when he asked her to dance, and he kept his gray eyes locked on her brown ones all the way through. When it was ended he bowed over her hand and said: "thank you, Milady. I am sure none of the angels in heaven dance half as well as you do."

"You are a shameless flatterer, Sir," she laughed, "but compliments are as meat and drink to a lady, as I am sure you know."

Alasdair led her off the dance floor, bowed to her again, then asked a stately woman in a red dress for the next dance. Rosina was very disappointed. He was quite the most charming fellow she had met for ages, and she was completely enchanted by him, so her heart quickened as he approached her again.

"Milady, I must confess that you have bewitched me," he smiled widely and extended his hand, "may I have the honor and the pleasure of this dance?"

She giggled and accepted his invitation willingly. For the rest of the evening he danced only with her, and at the end of the ball he approached her father and asked him if he could formally court his daughter. Her father approved without hesitation and from that day

they had been inseparable. They went riding together, attended balls held by the local gentry and took picnics outside when the weather was fine enough, but he seemed to be taking an impossibly long time to propose to her. As a woman, proposing to him was unthinkable, and she was beginning to lose hope when he eventually did ask her to marry him, six months later on a bleak day in the middle of January. Snow had been blanketing the ground for the last week and the castle was freezing except within a twenty feet radius of the big log fires which had been lit in all the rooms.

*A*lasdair rode into the castle on a huge black horse wearing a massive fur-lined black cloak with a hood. He looked like Death itself, Rosina thought with a shiver, silhouetted against the dazzling white snow, but as soon as he walked into her apartments he took the cloak off then smiled and the illusion was shattered because that mischievous grin was like the sun coming out. She ran into his arms and tilted her face up for his kiss, then he laughed softly and kissed her, sweetly and tenderly.

"*I* count myself a very lucky man to have found you," his voice was husky with emotion and his eyes full of love. Suddenly he knelt down on one knee in front of her and said formally:

"*R*osina, I love you. Will you make me the happiest man in the world and be my wife?"

For a few seconds she had not the breath to speak, then she squealed and burst into tears. Alarmed, Alasdair got up and pulled her into his arms.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, my Love," he said anxiously, "I wouldn't have upset you for the world. I won't ask you again."

Rosina looked up at him, smiling through her tears.

"You don't understand," she replied happily, "these are tears of joy."

She cupped his face in her hands and looked deeply into his eyes, "I will marry you, tomorrow if you wish."

He embraced her tightly.

"I will have to ask your father," he said softly.

"I know, but he will say yes, without a doubt," she said firmly, "he loves you almost as much as I do."

Alasdair lifted her off her feet and whirled her around, both of them laughing happily.

"How much do you love me?" she asked playfully, looking down into his dark eyes.

He pretended to think for a moment.

"Hmmm..." he narrowed his eyes, "as much as the bees love the flowers? As much as the flowers love the sun? As much as Adam loved Eve?"

"And I love you as much as God loves His angels," she kissed him again, "my father is in the library - if you have the courage to speak to him!" She looked at him from under her eyelashes, smiling coyly.

"I would walk through fire for you if you told me to," Alasdair said lovingly, "and now I must go and do just that!"

"Good luck, my Love," Rosina called after him as he left. He stood at the door for a second and blew her a kiss.

She sat tensely by the fire till the short winter day began to fade into twilight and the housemaid came to light the candles.

Her own maid, Maisie, came in to ask if she wanted something to eat but she refused, sighing,

"Father and Alasdair have been in the library for an age discussing our possible marriage and I am so afraid Father will refuse," she looked up into Maisie's dark brown eyes, but the girl only smiled.

"Your Father knows what's best for you Mistress," she said kindly. Rosina and Maisie had a strangely familiar and intimate relationship with a mistress and maid, but they had enjoyed that since the first

time they set eyes on each other. If one had been a boy and the other a girl it would have been love at first sight, but as it was it was a strong and lasting friendship, even though socially they were not equals. Maisie still called her 'mistress' and always would. Maisie's mother and grandmother had both been ladies' maids, only leaving service when they got married, so Maisie could read, write, sew and even ride. These were accomplishments beyond most girls her age. She had no more than a trace of the lilting Highland accent of her peers, although she spoke fluent Gaelic and French because of her French grandmother on her mother's side. Rosina always thought that if fate had thrown the dice more equally Maisie would have been her best friend and social equal.

Often they would sit together while Rosina did her tapestry and Maisie did her own sewing. She was smocking a dress for her sister's little girl, and her work was, as usual, painstaking and precise. They often spent evenings like this, sometimes in companionable silence and sometimes gossiping happily about everything under the sun. Occasionally Maisie would even read to her, and Rosina thought that she must be the luckiest woman alive to have such a companion. Maisie was one of those rare people who could be comfortable in the world of both upper and lower classes alike. She could bring in all the scandal and fun from the servants' quarters, kitchen and stables as well as the tittle-tattle from other ladies' maids, so she got the latest on the nobility too. When Rosina came back from an excursion with Alasdair she would tell her every detail of it, right down to the last kiss. They were more like sisters, sometimes, Maisie thought.

Now she was desperately worried, though. What if her father refused? What if Alasdair demanded a huge dowry? What if he insisted that they wait? So many things could go wrong. But suddenly the door opened and her father and Alasdair came striding in, both of them grinning all over their faces.

"Daughter," her father, Laird Hugh Buchanan came forward and hugged her, "I would like to introduce you to my future son-in-law!"

*A*lasdair bowed and kissed Rosina's hand, then looked back at her father.

"And I would like to introduce you to my future wife!"

Rosina beamed with joy. Her cup was overflowing with it, and she could never remember being so happy.

After dinner that evening, when Alasdair had gone, Rosina sent for Maisie to come and share her news. She was so excited she could hardly contain herself. As soon as Maisie came in she rushed to meet her grabbing her hands and whirling her around in an exuberant dance. She was laughing so much that Maisie laughed too, caught up in her infectious mood. At last Rosina, breathless, came to a halt and put her arm around Maisie's shoulders.

"Now, Mistress," Maisie was laughing, "tell me what the big celebration is for!"

"Oh, Maisie!" Rosina clapped her hands, "Alasdair has asked me to marry him! And Father has agreed! I am to be wed!"

Maisie smiled.

"I am happy for you, Mistress!" Maisie said enthusiastically. She could not do otherwise than join in with Rosina's joy, but she wondered if she were ready for such a commitment. In many ways, she was much younger than Maisie even though they were almost exactly the same age, because Maisie had had a much less sheltered upbringing. Rosina had never wanted for a single thing in her life. She had never had to work hard for anything, and she had had the unconditional love of both her parents till her mother died when she was only eight years old.

Maisie was not poor. Her parents lived in a reasonably sized house in the town with their two other daughters, both of whom were to be married soon to respectable tradesmen. Maisie earned a moderate income, and although she would never be well off she would always

be comfortable. But she knew the rougher side of life, not first hand, but she had seen ragged, hungry children, beggars, and women who sold their bodies to put food on the table for their families.

She had also seen the men who preyed on them, rich men who devoured them body and soul. These were men who could win or lose an entire year or more of her earnings or more on the turn of a card and think nothing of it. She had seen hundreds of them and despised them, and now her intuition told her she was looking at one more when she looked at Alasdair McPhail. She had caught him looking at her sometimes in a way that a certain type of man - she would not call them 'gentlemen' - looked at women servants. Maisie always dressed modestly, some might even say severely, so she had always been careful never to attract unwarranted attention. Even so, she was an attractive girl with her long, dark brown hair and deep-set eyes that were almost black in some lights. She attracted attention wherever she went. Sometimes this annoyed her and sometimes it did not, but it depended on who the attention was coming from. In spite of the fact that everyone seemed to like Alasdair and find him quite charming, there was something about him she could not trust, and apart from the occasional sideways glance - she could forgive him that - she could not put her finger on it. But now she summoned up a smile and congratulated her.

"He is a fine man," she lied, "and I am sure he will make you a wonderful husband. Now I think we must think about a dress!"

"Amongst the hundreds of other things we have to think about, Maisie!"

Whatever Maisie thought about him, the man certainly had raised Rosina's spirits, and it was not her place to interfere. Still, she had nagging doubts about him, ones that she could not put into words. One blustery day in March, when Rosina and Alasdair had gone out riding Maisie found herself alone, bored and without any outlet for her pent-up energies. She was about to go to the kitchen for something to eat when she saw Laird Fraser entering the courtyard with his manservant Malcolm.

She had not much time for Laird Fraser. Few people had. Maisie was a

charitable person who liked to think the best of everyone, so thought that there must be redeeming qualities inside him somewhere, but for the life of her, she could not think where. He was handsome enough, with his raven-black hair and striking blue eyes, and she could see that he was a Celt through and through. He was over six feet tall and looked as if he could lift an ox, but she could think of no maid in whom he had ever shown the slightest bit of interest and yet was the most eligible bachelor in the whole south west of Scotland.

No balls or celebrations were ever given at his castle apart from the generous feast he gave to his servants every year at Christmas, and neither did he attend them. It was rumored that he had a mistress, a married woman, but no-one had ever seen her or indeed had a clue to her identity - if she existed at all. There was another even more salacious one that suggested he preferred men to women - well, if that were true it was his own business. After all, there was no law that she knew of that compelled a man to marry at all. Today he was dressed in working clothes although he was coming to see a nobleman. That was disrespectful, to say the least, but typical. His dazzling blue eyes swept over her for a second then passed on as if he had not seen her at all.

*M*alcolm, whom she knew reasonably well, came over to bid her good day. He was a stocky man of medium height with curly brown hair and hazel eyes. She guessed him to be in his late thirties. He always had a smile and a cheery word for her, and he was as unlike his employer as it was possible to be.

"Good mornin' Maisie!" he waved to her as he passed her, running slightly to keep up with Logan's long strides, "how are ye keepin'?"

"*F*ine, Malky!" she replied with a warm smile, "you?"

Malcolm nodded at Logan and grimaced behind his back.

"Overworked as usual!" he mouthed quietly. If Logan Fraser had heard him he gave no sign but strode purposefully up to the staircase that

led to the apartments of the Laird, where a servant met him and showed him in. Malcolm relaxed thankfully.

"*I*m going to eat something," Maisie declared, "do you want to keep me company?"

Malcolm rubbed his hands together.

"Aye!" he said with relish, "I'm that hungry I could eat the Laird's left leg!"

Maisie pretended to be puzzled.

"Which Laird?" she asked, "not ours - his legs are far too skinny!"

Malcolm gave her a playful dig in the ribs, laughing.

"Naw - my Laird!" he told her, with a grim smile, "thon thigh o' his could keep a faimly fed for a fortnight!"

*M*aisie grimaced at the thought.

"Ugh!" she protested, "stop it, Malky! You're making me feel quite sick!"

They went into the kitchen where the cook, Agnes, gave them both milk and a stack of freshly baked oatcakes. They sat down in the servants' hall to eat.

"I hear yer young lady's gettin' wed," Malky observed.

"Yes, in a month," Maisie smiled at him, "he seems to be a nice enough fellow. She loves him to distraction, and it looks as if he feels the same about her. I'm always finding them kissing!"

They laughed.

"I hear there's bad blood between him and his brother," Malky observed, draining his cup. Maisie shrugged.

"Yes, well that's none of my business. No doubt she knows what she's

doing." Abruptly, she changed the subject, since she never discussed Rosina's private affairs with anyone. Talking about them kissing was one thing, but anything more than that was too intimate to talk about. "Your laird never smiles," she remarked thoughtfully.

"Aye, he's a bit dour," Malky agreed, "but a better man you could never hope tae meet."

Maisie was astonished.

"He always looks so miserable," she remarked, chewing appreciatively on the last oatcake.

"He isna' one for smilin,'" he said thoughtfully, "thinks a lot, says little, but he has a good heart. He is a fair man."

"Well, I still don't like him," Maisie replied sourly. Malcolm laughed,

"Ye're no' the only yin," he sighed, "an' it's a pity. Sometimes things that look good are no' sae nice inside, an' sometimes it's the ither way roon'."

Just then they heard Logan's deep voice calling Malcolm's name from outside. He scrambled up and wiped his mouth.

"*T*hank ye, lass," he said appreciatively, "I wis ready for that."

Logan was already astride his horse when they came out. Maisie

curtsied and this time he nodded and his glance raked her from head to foot. She felt as though she were naked.

Logan

Logan Fraser had very few clothes. He had garments for work, and one dress outfit that his father had left him when he died, but none for calling on people in the afternoon, so Laird Buchanan was going to have to tolerate him the way he was, since Logan labored on the land with his men and would not apologize for it. He had been negotiating the buying of some land from Laird Buchanan, and as usual, he was his no-nonsense, down-to-business self. A maid brought them wine, which he refused politely, and Laird Buchanan asked him why he would not drink it.

"I do not like the taste," he replied frankly, "and I do not like the way it affects me."

"Surely one glass -"

Logan looked at him levelly. The icy regard from his sky blue eyes was piercing.

"Sir, I think I already said I do not like it," he stated firmly.

"Some ale?" the Laird persisted. Logan sighed inwardly and met him half-way. He did not want to spend more time here than he had to.

"May I have some milk?" he asked, "I like to keep a clear head when I am doing business."

The Laird was surprised but grateful that Logan Fraser had accepted some hospitality at least. The man was impossible, and he had begun to wish he had never invited him to Rosina's wedding, but they traded and did business together, so they had to be good neighbors and stay on friendly terms, much as it pained him. He wondered if there was

anyone whom Fraser actually liked, or who liked him, but if he enjoyed living without human society it was none of Hugh's business. Some people were just constructed differently, and only God knew why. No matter.

They agreed on a price and shook hands on it, then Logan finished his milk and nodded to Laird Hugh.

"Good day to you, Sir," he said politely, "and thank you for the drink." Then he turned and walked out without a backward glance.

Hugh stood looking after him, amazed. There had not been a single word wasted in the entire exchange - no pleasantries at all, just business. Hugh concluded that the man had no feelings.

In fact, Logan had plenty of feelings, but he kept them hidden behind an impenetrable wall of stone so that no-one could take them out and trample on them as they had once before. He had carefully locked away his tenderness, kindness, and love, and only allowed sternness, anger and bitterness to show. People shied away from him, he knew, but that was the way that he liked it. That way no-one could hurt him again.

He put to the back of his mind the fact that he was unutterably lonely, and sometimes at night when he could not contain his thoughts and memories, he cried himself to sleep. He hated weddings - in fact, he hated all gatherings of people with a passion - he was scared of them in case he was forced to make idle conversation with people from whom he sought to stay away. He was determined to make sure that he was the last one in and the first one out, doing no more than courtesy demanded. He would do that and no more, then no-one could fault him.

He had had a clockmaker from Glasgow make a silver clock for the happy couple as a wedding present, but if they had had a hundred

more it was no his problem. He had done his duty. He would eat moderately, drink water then make a discreet exit after congratulating the bride and groom. He had been invited with a partner, of course, but even if he had wanted to bring one, he could not think of a single maid who would want to go with him.

In fact, he was wrong. There were many young ladies who would have been very happy for Logan Fraser to walk escort him to the wedding, and even walk down the aisle with her, because he was without a doubt the most handsome man any of them had ever seen, with his striking coal-black hair and ice-blue eyes. However, his dour demeanor was absolutely terrifying to most young ladies. And at thirty years old, he was practically in his dotage, he thought, laughing inwardly. No, marriage was not on the cards for him, and he didn't care. If he told himself often enough he would believe it, he thought.

When he got back he stabled his horse, a chestnut mare called Maggie. He always stabled her himself, because he loved her so much he would trust no-one else to do it. He brushed her till she shone, and hugged her neck, laughing at the little whickering noises she made as he fed her slices of apple. Anyone who knew him would have been amazed to see him so animated and loving towards a fellow creature. But Logan much preferred animals to people. They could not hurt him.

He kissed Maggie's nose and went upstairs to his office, intending to start on his accounts, and as he expected, he opened the door and a river of dogs came bounding out to greet him. In fact, there were eight of them in all shapes and sizes from the tiniest terrier to the tallest mastiff. They jumped on him and licked his hands, every one of them trying to get his attention at once. He shouted, clapped his hands and they all fell silent at once, sitting on their haunches and watching him, then, one by one they lay down and went to sleep.

Logan finished his work, lay back in his chair and stretched. The thought of the wedding came back again. It was a week away and the closer it came the more he dreaded it. He consoled himself by thinking

that eight days from now it would all be over.

A maidservant came with his washing water and he quickly made his ablutions and got into bed. The sound of the dogs' quiet breathing soothed him as it always did and he peacefully went to sleep, hoping that the darkness would bring no night terrors, as it sometimes did. He did not pray, for his faith had been shattered.

Fortunately, that night was quiet, and he slept well, waking refreshed and ready for the day. He was going to see some of his tenant farmers today. It was strange, he thought, that the only people to whom he could show a little bit of his tender side was to his servants and farmers, and they cheered him up.

In the first croft he went to, the MacPhersons, he found Mrs. MacPherson with a tiny newborn in her arms. He smiled when he saw it and dismounted from Maggie to hold the baby. She smiled at him and handed the baby over.

"Haud his heid, My Laird," she admonished, "he is no' yet old enough tae hold it up himself."

"A boy?" Logan was enchanted by the deep blue eyes that stared back at him, and he felt a longing so deep that it almost ached. "What is his name, Ellie?"

Ellie blushed.

"If ye dinnae' mind, my Laird, we wid like tae ca' him Logan." She was wringing her hands nervously.

"Mind?" he said incredulously, "mind? Of course, I do not mind, Ellie! I am honored, and he is a very handsome little boy. I will send a present for him."

He smiled again before he left to find Colin MacPherson.
Ellie felt warm inside, knowing that a smile from Logan was a rarely-bestowed gift.

Alasdair

Alasdair was looking forward to the wedding of course. He was a man's man, and he partook of all the pleasures that a fit man in his prime enjoyed. He was not in the first flush of youth - but his bride was, still with years and years ahead of her to carry healthy children. He played cards, went to see bare-knuckled boxing and dog fights, and occasionally availed himself of the services of a certain kind of woman in the bustling streets of Glasgow. These were things that a man-about-town was expected to do.

Not for him was the management of lands and estates. Although his wife's property was about to become his after the current Laird died (which, he prayed would not be too long, although he was still only middle-aged) Alasdair intended to appoint managers and stewards to attend to the dirty work of farming and accounting, then enjoy the fruits of their labor. He was sure Rosina would obey him. After all, was she not absolutely head over heels in love with him already? Yes, she was, and she would do whatever he wanted, or he would make her do it.

The loss of his inheritance had hit him hard, and his allowance, although a fortune to some people, was not enough to keep him in the lifestyle to which he had become accustomed. He had always been rich, but when his gambling became a fever his father had simply turned the taps off. There was to be no more gambling money or money to spend on whores. He was allowed to go out one night a week with a pittance in his pocket, and his friends laughed at him.

He started stealing from his late mother's jewelry collection, and when he had stolen and sold all of it, a valuable painting was about to disappear. As Alasdair carefully and noiselessly took it down from the

wall of the great dining room at three in the morning, a light suddenly came out of nowhere as his father, brother and an armed guard materialized out of the darkness, holding lanterns.

"Good morning, Alasdair," Alan McPhail said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "I found the empty jewelry box yesterday, but I thought that it was one of the servants. I took them all into my office one by one and questioned them. Many of the ladies cried and one of the men did too. To my eternal shame, I thought he was weak. Never in my wildest imaginings did I think my own son could sell his mother's jewelry to play cards with a crowd of scoundrels!"

"Father - it's not what you think -"

"Oh? it's not, is it? Then please tell me what it is, exactly." He sat down at the table, and Alasdair's brother Connor did likewise, both looking up at him expectantly. Alasdair put the painting down on the floor and then looked up at them again.

His mind was working overtime wondering how he was going to get out of the situation. He decided to be penitent. He did not feel penitent. He felt furious, but he put his hand over his eyes, shook his head and assumed an expression of shame.

"I am sorry, Father," he said huskily, "what I did was unforgivable but I beg your pardon anyway. Please say you forgive me."

His father stood up and looked down at him.

"I am disgusted with you," he said scornfully, "do you know that our cook, Alison, who has been with us for thirty years, wept and threatened to leave us today? She is a good loyal servant worth ten of you! And there were others!"

Connor had said nothing up till then, but now he took his father's arm and tried to turn him around to lead him away. Alan shook his hand off.

"You will go to your room and you will stay there," he said, his voice thick with loathing, "till I see fit to let you out. There will be a guard at the door all the time and IF I feel merciful that day I will allow you ten minutes outside." He paused, breathing heavily, then swept away with Connor following closely on his heels. He was led up to his bedroom where the guard locked the door from outside and stood guard all night. Alasdair was so full of rage that he could not sleep, but the very next morning Connor came to his door, fully dressed.

"Father is going into Glasgow today," he said calmly, "he wishes to know the name of the person to whom you sold the jewels."

Alasdair's rage boiled over. He thrust his face up to Connor's and said in tones of deep loathing: "then he must come and ask me himself."

Connor's dark brown eyes, so like his father's, looked at him, still unmoving, still calm. His serenity was one of the traits that annoyed Alasdair most about his brother. He was able to remain unruffled under just about any situation while Alastair had a wildfire temper and blew up into a fury at the slightest excuse. Now, Connor stood up.

"I will tell him," he said evenly and left.

Alasdair gave a great roar of rage and threw a brass candlestick at the wall, where it made a great dent in the woodwork. A moment later his father came in, took him by the collar of his jacket and hauled him out of the room. He did not say a word but thrust him into the carriage with Connor sitting beside him.

"Now," Alan McPhail said between gritted teeth, "you will tell me where to go. And you had better hope he still has it or I will make you suffer!"

Such was the menace in his father's brown eyes that Alasdair backed down at once. When they got to the Jewelry shop Alasdair was amazed to see his father take out his pistol.

"I've sold it a'," the panicked owner said, putting his hands in the air.

Connor stepped up and held his hands behind his back while his father made a thorough search. He came back a moment later with a small velvet pouch.

"Hmmm..." he said thoughtfully, "there must be someone you are even more scared of than me. But don't worry, I will keep you safe."

True to his word, he took him to the town jail for trial the next month.

Alan called his son into his office next morning.

"You are no longer welcome in this house," he said firmly, "you may go and stay in our house in town, and I will give you an adequate allowance to live on for the rest of your life. The gambling will cease. If it does not, the allowance will stop," he paused. "I want no shame brought on this family so I will attempt to staunch in whatever way I can any rumors that might arise about you. My estate will go to Connor when I die, which I suspect will not be long from now. Pack whatever you need and go. Goodbye, Alasdair."

He looked down at his ledger book and began to write again. Alasdair was shocked.

"But you can't -" his father held up a hand.

"I have nothing more to say."

True to his word, his father managed to coerce, bribe and blackmail people into silence. Perhaps father and son were not so different after all. A month later, Alan died of a heart attack. Alasdair bet on which of the four ministers available for the funeral would officiate. He lost.

But now his luck had turned, and he was going to bed a beautiful young virgin. He could hardly wait.

The Wedding

Rosina's dress was almost ready. Maisie had been working on it ceaselessly every free minute she had, and she loved every stitch she sewed. The material was a pale pink silk which she was trimming with fine cream linen lace which her father had imported from Italy especially for the occasion. Rosina was beginning to irritate her by hovering at her shoulder every time she picked up her needles, but she told herself to be patient. After all, Maisie's mother had warned her that patience would be one of the qualities a ladies' maid needed in abundance. So every time Rosina asked another question or picked up the dress in-the-making to have another look, she visualized her mother's face and remembered her words.

As the dress materialized Rosina herself became more and more excited. She was counting days, and Maisie felt like slapping her sometimes, but she couldn't help but feel equally happy for her. Alasdair made frequent appearances but he still made Maisie uneasy. Was there such a thing as a man being TOO charming?

One day she went to find Rosina for a fitting and found the two of them in Rosina's parlor wrapped in a passionate embrace. She was about to back out quietly but Alasdair heard her and looked up. He laughed.

"Come in Maisie," he straightened his clothing as Rosina looked around, eyes alight with mischief.

"I'm sorry, Mistress, Sir," Rosina looked at the floor wishing it would open up and swallow her, "I can come back another time."

"No," Alasdair smiled at her, "I should be going anyway," he sighed

regretfully, then abruptly changed his mood, "only one more week, Sweetheart."

Rosina walked him out, smiling from ear to ear. Suddenly, Maisie shivered.



Three days before the wedding, Hugh Buchanan forbade all contact between the bride and groom. Alasdair was not permitted even to set foot inside the castle walls.

"Just in case," he warned, shaking a finger at her.

"In case of what?" Rosina asked, puzzled.

Maisie stared at her. Nobody had told her about the mysteries of love. She groaned inwardly, realizing that she would have to do it herself.

"Nobody ever told you about what happens when you get married?"

Rosina frowned and shook her head.

"No, but by the look on your face it looks as though it will be dreadful."

"No," she laughed, "they tell me it is wonderful."

Then she poured a glass of wine for each of them and told her everything she needed to know. Rosina's eyes became rounder and rounder, and she put a hand over her mouth.

"My goodness, Maisie!" she said, shocked. "I am so glad you told me!"

Maisie smiled a sad smile.

"So many maids go into marriage unprepared." She sighed, then brightened up. "But now you are not one of them!"

"Thank you, Maisie," Rosina said fondly, "where would I be without you? But why did my father not tell me this?"

"He might have if you were a boy, Mistress!" She replied mischievously.

She filled their glasses with wine again and they clinked glasses.

"To your future happiness, Mistress," Maisie said.

"Call me Rosie -please?" Rosina pleaded, "we have been together for so long and you are no longer a servant to me, but a friend."

Maisie shook her head firmly.

"Thank you Mistress, and I am truly honored," she replied, "but it would not be at all fitting. You pay me. I cannot be a friend and be paid at the same time."

Rosina looked sad, then smiled.

"I will persuade you someday," she promised, "someday soon."



It was two days before the wedding, and at last, the dress was finished, and they both stood in front of Rosina's long mirror looking at her wearing it.

"Oh! Maisie!" Rosina squealed. Maisie's ears hurt and she put her hands over them, "you are an artist! It is so beautiful!"

And indeed the pale shell pink of the dress with its lace trimmings, fashionable ruffles, and stiff bodice made Rosina look like a queen. They took it off and packed it away carefully in a trunk, then Maisie made Rosina ready for bed before retiring to her own small room next door. The night was brightly moonlit, and she was looking up at the full disk, mesmerized. She was in a half-dream, half-awake state, and it was comforting to just let herself drift away on a sleepy cloud. For a moment, she debated on whether or not to stay in her own room on Rosina's wedding night or to ask for somewhere further away so that

she could not hear any noises they might make. She smiled. Rosina was so happy, and Maisie was happy for her. But Alasdair...she shook her head irritably. He had just pushed her off her cloud.

The wedding was to be held at half-past five in the afternoon, but Alasdair was ready much earlier, which just gave him time to ride the few miles to the Castle and have a glass of wine before the ceremony. His mind was full of what was going to happen in the bedchamber that night, and it was an effort for him to keep his mind on anything else.

"Soon," he told himself, "soon."

The castle church was full when the bride and her father came in. Every local dignitary in greater Glasgow seemed to have been invited and Rosina knew hardly any of them, except the stern-faced Logan Fraser and a few others. There was an audible gasp as the crowd saw Rosina in her pink dress clutching a bouquet of tiny pink roses. Her father smiled at her tearfully, kissed her cheek and put her hand in Alasdair's.

Rosina said her vows strongly and clearly, smiling into Alasdair's eyes, and he did likewise. The minister's homily was mercifully short and they all adjourned to the Great Hall for the wedding feast. Maisie wished there had been some way of recording a picture of Rosina's face for posterity. She had never seen her look so joyful or so beautiful.

They were not to have a bedding ceremony since Rosina's father was uncomfortable with the idea, so when Rosina was ready she looked up into Alasdair's eyes and gave a slight nod. He smiled at her. They went upstairs and the assembled company cheered them. There were a few ribald comments from the men, but they laughed them off.

Logan, standing at the bottom of the stairs and dressed to the hilt in full Highland dress complete with bonnet, was ready to go home. He had a headache, but he decided to wait a few minutes for propriety's sake. He pretended to be looking at the portraits of Buchanan forebears, but in reality, he wanted not to have to look at anyone. He ascended the stairs, actually beginning to find some of the likenesses quite interesting as he compared their features to the current generation. He proceeded along the corridor a little way. Now he was being intrusive, he knew, but excessive curiosity had always been one of his weaknesses and had got him into trouble more than a few times. He had wandered along for quite a way when he heard the noise. It had been a scream followed by a thud. He went to the door and listened for a moment. He could hear the sound of a woman softly whimpering, but the man was silent.

"My Lady," he hissed, "is anything amiss? It's Logan Fraser." Something had told him to keep his voice down. A moment later he heard a key turn and the door was opened. Rosina stood there, her face white as a sheet, and she was no longer a beautiful bride.

After the Wedding

*R*osina was standing in the doorway, as immobile as a statue.

There were streams of tears running unchecked down her cheeks and her ginger-red hair, which had been so beautifully coiffed by Maisie, was in complete disarray. Her fine cotton lawn nightdress had been ripped from the neckline almost to the navel. Logan pulled the torn edges together and made her nerveless hands hold them. She was covered in blood, but it was not her own. To his horror, Logan saw that she had a heavy silver candlestick in her right hand which was also bloodied and was dripping on to the carpet. Gently, he sat her down on the bed then turned his attention to the man's body which was sprawled in a twisted position on the floor, the eyes open and gazing sightlessly at nothing. There was a deep gaping wound in his forehead which had penetrated his skull, and Logan could see the jagged shards of bone that had been driven inside. In death, Alasdair McPhail, the handsome gigolo who had wed, not his sweetheart but his gold mine, was extremely ugly.

"He is dead," Logan said heavily. He took the coverlet from the bed and covered the body with it, then he gave her a glass of wine. She took it from him, her hands shaking. He went to get her a shawl to cover the gaping front of her nightdress, then draped it over her and waited for her to speak.

A Few Moments Earlier...

When they went into the bedroom and Rosina went into the dressing room to change into her nightgown, Alasdair laughed.

"Why put it on when I am going to take it off again?"

"When you get a present, do you not like to unwrap it?" she asked coyly. Alasdair smiled. Every minute she made him wait was a minute too long. Eventually, she came out of the dressing room in a modest cream-colored high-necked gown. Alasdair had had a few glasses of whiskey, but far from it cooling his ardor it had fueled it.

"At last!" Alasdair smiled at her and opened his arms. He was still wearing his plaid but had taken off his shirt, shoes, and jacket. Now he wrapped his arms around her. She was trembling.

"Shhh, lass," he whispered, "I am not going to hurt you - well, maybe a little, but you will like it, I promise," then he kissed her. At first, it was soft and tender, then it began to be harsher as he held the back of her head and kept his mouth clamped against hers. She had no idea what to do. Was this normal? She endured it for as long as she could till her lips almost began to bleed from the pressure. She wrenched her head away. "Alasdair, you're hurting me," she complained, pressing her fingertips to her lips. He smiled at her, but it was a strange smile. His brows were drawn down and there was a strange look of barely-concealed anger and lust in his eyes.

"I haven't yet begun, Sweetheart," he whispered. He kissed her

again, this time biting her lip hard. There was blood in her mouth now. Alasdair was losing control. She tasted so good that he was becoming even more inflamed. She tried to scream but he clamped a hand over her mouth.

"You know what your wedding vows say?" he reminded her silkily, "love, honor and obey?"

Rosina nodded, her eyes wide and terrified. He liked that look - it made him feel rampant and powerful. He stepped back from her for a moment to look at her and she tried to bolt for the door, but he caught her, then holding her by the neck of her nightdress, he ripped it straight down the front, then slapped her face on both cheeks with the front and back of his hand. She gasped and moaned with pain while trying instinctively to cover up, but he caught her wrists and looked his fill. She looked even better than he had expected.

"Lovely," he said with lascivious satisfaction. He pushed her down onto the bed where she curled into a ball, trying to protect herself. He gave a sneering laugh, knowing it would do her no good. It never did, because no woman had ever been stronger than he, and there had been dozens. Rosina looked desperately around her for a weapon, and it was then that she saw the candle in its heavy silver holder.

Swiftly, Alasdair removed the rest of his clothing, and she could see that he was already aroused. He was still smiling, his evil grin even more ugly now as he climbed onto the bed. He was halfway onto it when she swept the candlestick off the night stand and brought it down with all her strength on his head. It was made of solid silver and weighed at least five pounds, and with the momentum of the swing, it hit his head with sickening force.

*A*lasdair watched her cowering and was filled with an overwhelming sense of absolute, exquisite power. He saw the weapon a split second before it hit him and did not even have time to put his hand up to shield his face before the candlestick made shattering contact with his forehead. There was a flash, a moment of unbearable

pain, and then all was dark. Alasdair McPhail was no more.



When she saw Logan Fraser, Rosina has never been so glad to see anyone in her whole life. She passed a trembling hand across her forehead.

"Can - can you get Maisie for me, please?" she was sobbing, and he gave her his linen handkerchief. He sat looking at her for a moment, frowning.

"Look at me, Lady Rosina," he said quietly, "I do not know what happened here, but I can guess. Some men like to see pain. I will fetch Maisie for you and we will decide what to do. May I come back? I will understand if you would flinch from another man but Maisie will be here. You will be safe."

Rosina nodded.

"They will think I did this on purpose," she said, breaking down into tears again, "I will be hanged, or beheaded."

"You will not," he said firmly. "Now, my Lady, change into a fresh nightgown and lock the door. I will be back shortly."

Rosina took of the ruined garment and let it drop to the floor.

She went to the washstand and scrubbed herself as hard as she could with her sponge, and after she had put on a clean nightdress she felt a little better. She could still see Alasdair's face, that smile with his dark gray eyes black with lust and greed, his mouth twisted with the need for power over her. She had loved him, and she still loved the man he had been before this night. But of course, that man had never really existed - it was all a sham to get his hands on her fortune. And the violence? Had that been a means to an end too or was he really the

kind of perverted man who enjoyed hurting women? Both, she thought sadly.

Covering Up

Maisie was in her own bedroom resting. The labors of the day had taken it out of her and she was glad the service was over. She had eaten with the other servants at their own banquet and now all she wanted to do was sleep. When she heard the soft knocking at her door she groaned. Surely Rosina did not want anything now?

"Who is it?" she asked wearily, yawning.

"Maisie? It is Logan Fraser. I must speak to you. Rosina is hurt."

Normally Maisie would never have opened her door to a man under any circumstances, but now she flung it open without thinking.

"Hurt?" she asked wildly, "how badly?"

"Not hurt in her body exactly," Logan stumbled over the words, "please come and see. She is asking for you - but be quiet. It is quite a shocking scene."

Maisie nodded, swallowed and followed him. Then she knocked softly on Rosina's door.

"Mistress, it's Maisie and Laird Fraser. May we come in, please?"

The door was opened a few inches then Rosina stepped aside to open it properly. As soon as she saw Maisie she threw herself into her arms and began to weep bitterly. Logan locked the door then sat down. He looked very big in the room, and although Maisie knew that Alasdair had been smaller, he had been big enough to overpower a small woman like Rosina.

Presently, Rosina calmed down a little and Maisie poured her some wine. Logan refused but thanked her.

"What happened, Mistress?" Maisie asked gently. She put her arm around Rosina, who laid her head on Maisie's supportive shoulder.

"He - he attacked me," she said tonelessly, "he kissed me then bit my lips so hard they bled, then he slapped my face and tore my nightdress. I thought he was going to kill me. He threw me onto the bed and he was about to - to -"

She shook her head and tailed off.

"We know what he wanted to do, my Lady," Logan said softly. Then he became practical. "I am sorry, Lady Buchanan, but the law, in this case, is on your husband's side. It is very unfair, but a woman must obey her husband according to her wedding vows, and a man cannot be found guilty of raping his wife. He is also allowed to beat her."

A leaden weight dropped into Rosina's stomach. None of this was her fault, yet she was the one who was being punished.

"I am going to hang," She said heavily.

"Indeed you are not," Logan said determinedly. "We are going to make this look as if someone else did it."

Maisie looked at him, puzzled.

"What are you going to do?" she asked curiously.

"It's best you don't know, for your own sake," he said firmly, then stood up.

"Maisie, is there a back staircase?"

"Aye," she replied, mystified, "the servants use it, but it will be unused at the moment. They are all still eating."

"Good," he smiled grimly, "we are about to stage a little tableau."

Maisie lifted a corner of the sheet to look at the corpse's face. She felt

like spitting on him but restrained herself. She was about to close his eyes, but Logan stopped her.

"When they find him it must look as though he was surprised," he put the coverlet back over Alastair's face, "do you have a velvet purse for a necklace or a bracelet?" he asked Rosina.

"Yes, but why?" she went to her jewelry box and tipped a gold necklace out of a purple velvet purse, then put the necklace back in the box. Logan put it in the pocket of his jacket.

"Now you must tidy and clean up this room," he said, "and make it look as though nothing has happened here. Go and get whatever you need. Then he squatted down and picked up the body with little apparent effort. When Maisie opened the door he crept out as quietly as he could. They watched him as he walked along the hallway and disappeared down the stairs. When he was gone, the two women looked at each other.

"Are you better now, Mistress?" Maisie asked anxiously.

"Oh, Maisie," Rosina covered her face with her hands, "do you think I am a monster?"

Maisie embraced her.

"I cannot think of anyone who is less like a monster than you, Mistress," she replied fervently, "he was an evil man and we are well rid of him."

Rosina gave her a watery smile.

"Thank you, Maisie," then, rubbing her eyes, she tried to pull herself together and said briskly: "shall we begin?"

"We must also cover your face with some lip rouge and powder, Mistress," and sponge it before bruises rise."

Maisie quickly and efficiently covered Rosina's face in cosmetics and styled her hair to cover as much of her cheeks as she could.

"Your lips are swollen from an excess of kissing!" she said firmly.

Maisie got some cleaning materials from a nearby storeroom, then they stripped off the rest of the bedclothes and put on fresh ones. They cleaned the floor and scrubbed the bedposts, and when they had finished they looked at their work with satisfaction.

"For someone who has never lifted a scrubbing brush in her life, mistress, you did a fine job!"

Rosina laughed half-heartedly then sat down and buried her head in her hands again. The shock had not worn off and Rosina doubted it ever would. She could not ever imagine being free of the memories of her wedding night.

They heard a very faint knock at the door again and Maisie unlocked it. Logan came back into the room. He had run up the stairs and looked slightly out of breath, but he quickly recovered.

"Ladies," he said grimly, "I was not here tonight, and neither were you, Maisie. I have taken Alasdair's body down to a drainage ditch near the outer wall. They will find him there with the empty purse a few yards away from him. Maisie, you must go back to your room and pretend you have been sleeping all night," he paused for breath, then looked at Rosina.

"Lady Rosina," he leaned forward in his chair and speared her with the stare of his blue eyes, "please listen carefully."

"I will," she said hoarsely.

"When you and Alasdair came to the bedroom you kissed a little passionately for a while." He pointed to her lips. "Then he told you to get into bed at once and wait for him so that he could retrieve a present for you which he had hidden downstairs so that you had absolutely no chance of finding it. Tell your father it was a little peculiarity of his. When they find the body they will find a velvet purse with it so that it looks as though your gift was stolen."

"Why did they not take the purse too?" Maisie asked.

Logan shrugged.

"Because they did not - no special reason at all," he replied carelessly, shrugging.

"But there are guards at the gate and all around the grounds," Rosina pointed out.

"There are hundreds of people here with hundreds of servants," he answered, "and we cannot ask everyone for a character reference. Someone saw him, took away the piece of jewelry and blended back into the crowd. Perhaps the thief had an accomplice at the castle - no-one will ever know."

"But I must have been worried when he was gone so long," frowned.

"But you were very tired and fell asleep," Logan said, "and that is why in a few hours you are going to wake up your father to go and search for him. They will find his body and the velvet purse and draw their own conclusions. By that time all the guests will have gone home with their servants, and no-one will know who or how many of them there were. The nobility will never suspect each other, so I think they will suspect a servant, but no-one has a shred of proof."

The two women looked at each other.

"That is ingenious!" Rosina said, smiling at him, "thank you, my Laird. But - may I ask you something?" She looked puzzled.

"Of course you may," he replied, "ask, and I will answer if I can."

"Why are you doing this for me? We do not know each other and you do not seem to like anyone. Why me?"

He looked thoughtful for a moment.

"I know that I am not well liked," he said, "I know that I am not liked at all. I stay away from people because - well - I do not like them much. They scare me with their falseness."

"That is something I never expected to hear!" Rosina said incredulously, "why Laird, you are such a big man! "

He made a noise that might have been a laugh coming from someone

else.

"There is more than one type of fear, Lady Rosina," he was looking out of the window, his eyes far away, "I dislike the society of people who have nothing to say. I would rather talk to my tenants who are real, honest, and talk about things that matter - things that affect my life. Shallow people scare me because of their emptiness, and there are so many empty people out there. You are not empty, and when I saw you in such distress because of that -" his face twisted as he only just stopped himself from swearing, "that monster, how could I not help you? How could anyone not?"

Rosina stood up. She had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes.

"You are twice the man I thought you were," she said, smiling.

"Thank you, Milady," he answered, then treated her to one of his rare smiles. She was amazed. It was like the sun coming out, and she was enchanted by the dimples that appeared in his cheeks, the even whiteness of his teeth and the sparkle in his blue eyes.

Logan was amazed too. He never spoke about his feelings to anyone.

"Now I must sneak back and play my part again," he said grimly.

"And talk to the empty people?" Maisie asked, raising her eyebrows.

"For my sins," he kissed Rosina's hand and bowed slightly to Maisie.

"Goodnight, ladies," he said quietly.

"Thank you for everything!" Rosina called out as loudly as she dared, but he was gone.

The Body

"Goodnight Mistress," Maisie said as she tucked her into bed, "do not forget what the Laird said. And I am only a few doors away if you need me."

She turned away but Rosina caught her hand and held it.

"I could not live without you, Maisie," she said fervently. Maisie smiled.

"Neither could I without you, Mistress."

When she had gone and there was no-one left to talk to, the enormity of what she had done hit her like a sledgehammer. She had killed someone. She had taken a human life, and she had concealed it. Was she evil? She didn't think so. She had been acting in self-defense and God would forgive her, she hoped. Logan had been a revelation. He had been so kind - she had not realized the kind of man he was until tonight, but her intuition told her one thing. At some time in his life, he had been very, badly hurt.

She could not get out of her mind's eye the picture of Alasdair's sightlessly staring eyes. That would haunt her forever. She lay tensely in her bed, starting at every little sound. She had visions of Alasdair with the ghastly wound in his forehead, creeping up the stairs and coming to lie beside her. When she looked out and saw that the last carriage had left, she waited awhile then put on a robe and went downstairs. Her father was still in the hall, talking to the butler. She approached him, and he looked around, astonished to see her.

"Why lass!" he frowned, "why are you not in bed with your husband?"

Rosina shook her head and looked around her.

"It's very strange, Father," she said anxiously, "just after we went to our room he said he had a gift for me which he had hidden where I would never find it. He was always a bit strange that way - always looking over his shoulder, you know, so I thought nothing of it. He was always hiding things in strange places! It was one of those little things that made me love him so much." She paused, then went on: "when I said he could get it in the morning he said he didn't want to wait, he wanted me to have it right there and then. When he had been away for a wee while I thought he was talking to someone down here, so I waited for him, but eventually, I fell asleep. I think I had too much wine! I just woke up a moment ago and he has not come back to bed!" She looked and sounded almost hysterical. Her father embraced her and kissed the top of her head.

"Don't worry, Lass, we will find him," he laughed softly, "too much whiskey, I imagine! He is probably sleeping somewhere!"

Rosina nodded, hoping her acting skills were equal to the occasion, but she seemed to have been convincing so far.

"We will round up a search party," her father said firmly, "now do not worry, Lass. We will find him, and he probably will be none the worse for wear except for the very sore head he will have in the morning!"

*R*osina almost laughed out loud at the thought. She had given him such a sore head he would never have another one!

"I will come with you," she said firmly.

"Indeed you will not!" Hugh Buchanan's voice was indignant. "It is cold outside and you are shivering already. Go back to bed. I will call you when we find him and I will have a few choice words to say to him. Rosina laughed.

"Just bring him back, Father," she smiled grimly, "I will be saying - no, shouting - the choice words!"

Hugh Buchanan rounded up ten of his guards to search the extensive grounds of the castle, but it took an hour before the body was found, wedged into a drainage ditch a long way from the gate. It was one of the darkest parts of the courtyard since it was close to the wall and ran straight down into the moat, which was why Logan had chosen it. Hugh thought at first that he was unconscious, but the body was unnaturally cold and when they turned it over the men gasped at the ghastly head wound. The head was lying at an unnatural angle since Logan had broken its neck while dropping it into the tunnel, and the glassy eyes were still open till Hugh closed them. In the corpse's hand, they found the velvet pouch, almost torn in two as if the robbers had wanted to murder it too. His cloak, bloodied and dirty, had been torn as the body was dragged along the ground. The whole scene looked grisly and violent in the extreme. Logan had done a good job. Hugh passed a hand over his forehead, thinking of his daughter. This was going to break her heart.

"Douglas! Stuart!" he called two of his biggest men. "Find a blanket to wrap this body in and take it to the dungeon where nobody will find it. My daughter must not see it under any circumstances."

Hugh suddenly thought how strange it was that her daughter's husband was suddenly an 'it,' but his soul had left his body and he was no longer a human being, just a thing. He took a deep breath, dreading what he had to do.



Rosina had gone back to her room to dress and when she called on Maisie she found that she too had been restless and unable to sleep. "They have gone to look for him," Rosina said anxiously, "oh, Maisie, tell me I have done the right thing. Can we even trust Laird Fraser?" "I think we can," Maisie took her hands in hers, "Mistress, I think he is just one of those people who can't show their feelings, but I think he is a good man."

"I hope so," Rosina put her face in her hands, "because we have to trust him, do we not?"

"And Mistress," Maisie took her hands away again and looked her straight in the eye, "I think you did do the right thing. You were defending yourself. He may have murdered you! And you did not mean to kill him anyway. Whatever the law says, you were right, he was wrong and I am proud of you."

Rosina hugged her.

"Thank you, Maisie."

They decided to stay in Rosina's room till the body was found, preparing themselves for what was to come.

About forty minutes later, Laird Hugh knocked on the door and Maisie opened it for him. Both women stood waiting for him to speak. "Sit down, my Dear," he began, his voice heavy with dread. "I have bad news. We have found Alasdair's body."

Aftermath

Rosina sat down suddenly. She was only playing a part, she knew, but to hear the words coming out of her father's mouth was so shocking that she let out a gasp and put a hand to her chest, then looked up at her father. Her lips parted but she could not say anything. She was genuinely shocked. Maisie offered her a glass of wine but she waved it away.

"What happened?" she asked faintly, suddenly remembering that she was supposed to be acting.

"We think he was attacked and robbed," the Laird said gently, "but I do not want you to look at him yet, Rosina. We will make the body fit to be seen in a few hours."

"Who did it?" Rosina asked anxiously, "do you have any idea?"

"We will never know," Hugh said, sighing. "There were servants, horsemen, ladies in waiting, nobility -" he shrugged. "We cannot ask them all and most likely they are already gone."

She nodded. Now she really did feel like crying, and it was not an act.

"Do you want to lie and rest for awhile Mistress?" Maisie asked gently. Rosina nodded and led her to the bed, then tucked her in.

"I will sit with her, my Laird," she said gently, "she will not want to be alone."

"Come outside with me for a moment, Maisie," Hugh whispered. Maisie glanced back at Rosina, but she looked peaceful, so she followed the Laird out. They walked a few yards down the corridor, out of Rosina's earshot, and the Laird turned to her.

"Was the marriage consummated? Do you know?"

Maisie shook her head.

"I think not, my Laird," she said firmly, "we talked about many things while we were waiting and she told me that they had not yet made love."

"So there will be no chance of a child, then," he mused. "Thank you, Maisie."

Maisie turned and went back to the bedroom, where Rosina was silently weeping. She took her hands and caressed them gently for a moment.

"Maisie?"

"Yes, Mistress?"

"Would you mind lying beside me for a while? I know it's a strange request but it would comfort me."

Maisie, who had slept in the same bed as her mother and sisters many times, thought nothing of it. She gave Rosina a strong sleeping draught, then got into the big bed. Immediately Rosina laid her head on her shoulder, and in five minutes they were both fast asleep.

In the morning when Rosina woke up Maisie was still beside her, sleeping peacefully. When Rosina had woken, the shock hit her like the blow of a hammer. She wished she could wind back time.

She decided not to wake Maisie. She sat down for a while thinking about what would happen next. There would be a funeral and a period of mourning, then she would be expected to wear black for three months. All for a monster who had made Rosina's life miserable even by his death. She could not believe she had been so easily deceived by his compliments and flattery, but she was young and he had been her first love. Now there were things to be done, and the first was to tell Connor McPhail about his brother's death. Rosina washed then left Maisie sleeping peacefully and went downstairs to see her father. He

was sitting behind the desk in his office, but he was not working. He was gazing out of the window and Rosina could see by his drawn-down brows that he was not happy. He did not look sad, but angry, and she wondered why.

"Good morning father," Rosina said, "how are you?"

Laird Hugh jumped up and came to embrace her.

"More to the point, Rosie, how are you?" he looked into her face and she managed a little smile.

"I will be fine soon," she reassured him, "it has all been such a terrible, terrible shock."

He led her to a chair and she sat down.

"Have you sent a letter to Connor?" her heart was hammering as she asked the question, and she was twisting her hands in her lap without even realizing it.

"I have," he replied, "I feel responsible for the burial, so I will ask him to come here for the funeral and wake. And I am furious that what should have been the happiest day of your life was spoiled."

Rosina nodded sadly.

"Do you think he will come?" she asked doubtfully, "I know that there was no love lost between them. He would not even come to our wedding."

Hugh sighed and shrugged.

"I do not know," he replied, "I am hopeful of a timely response. I have many arrangements to make."

Rosina felt very guilty. She was the cause of all this. She had killed Alasdair and now everyone else was having to suffer for it. She should have been feeling guilty for the actual death, she thought, but she could not. What else could she have done but defend herself? But why had she not confided in her father? Because Logan Fraser had been right there to take matters out of her hands and she wanted no distress for Hugh, who had been the best father a girl could have had for as long as she could remember. Her mother had died of tuberculosis

when Rosina was eight, but she had good memories of her. No, her father would never know of this. She went back upstairs to find Maisie awake and tidying her bedroom.

"Mistress, you should have woken me!" She said reprovingly, "did you sleep well?"

"Yes, I did, surprisingly," Rosina said calmly.

Maisie was smoothing the covers of the bed and looked up, surprised at how well her mistress did look. Less than a day ago she had been looking forward to her wedding, then she had been married, killed her husband, covered up his death and found his body. After that she had slept. Maisie adored Rosina, and she knew that what she had done had not been deliberately wicked, and she was not sure if she could have had so much self-possession under the same circumstances, but she did not know how painful Rosina's thoughts were.

"Would you like some breakfast now, Mistress?" she asked, "I can bring you something light, some eggs, perhaps?"

Rosina shook her head.

"Thank you, Maisie, but I am not hungry," she replied, "maybe some milk?"

Maisie went down to the kitchen, where three of the maids and the cook accosted her at once, all asking for news.

"Quiet!" she shouted at the top of her voice. Silence fell. "Alasdair McPhail was found dead in the castle grounds this morning. He had his head bashed in. It could have been anyone so they are not sure if they are going to investigate or not."

"How is Lady Rosina?" one of the kitchen maids asked anxiously. Maisie smiled but carried on pouring her milk.

"She is upset, shocked and saddened as you can imagine," Maisie replied, "and unable to eat. The Laird is making arrangements for a

funeral as we speak. I cannot say anymore because I don't know anymore."

There was a shocked silence for a moment, then everyone started to talk at once.

"I feel awfy sorry for her, Miss Maisie," the cook said sadly. There was a chorus of agreement.

"I will tell her," Maisie smiled, "she will be very happy that you are so concerned about her."

She made her way through the throng and went back to Rosina, who was looking out of her window as if mesmerized by the view.

"The staff is all asking after your health, Mistress," she said, giving her the milk, "what are you thinking about?"

Rosina took a sip of her milk.

"About Laird Fraser," she answered, "he seems to be such a good man, yet nobody likes him. I feel sorry for him."

Maisie waited a while before answering.

"I have a feeling," she said, frowning, "that a long time ago his heart was broken, and he does not wish to see it happening again, so he keeps the world away."

Rosina looked at her, interested suddenly.

"You could be right," she twitched a smile, "but there are many maids who would queue up to get a look at that handsome face!"

They laughed, then Rosina put her hand over her mouth.

"I should not be laughing or smiling, Maisie. This time yesterday Alasdair was alive. Now he is dead and I killed him!"

Maisie took her by the shoulders and shook her a little.

"Mistress!" she said sternly, "it was self-defense! It was not your fault and it is not your fault that we are having to cover it up! The law is on the side of men. Stop blaming yourself!"

*R*osina nodded. She could see the sense of that, but the guilt would not leave her.

Connor

When Connor received the letter he felt as though someone had punched him in the stomach. His only brother was dead, the one he had loved and hated all his life, and whom latterly he had loathed with a passion, had been struck down in his prime. Finally one of the lowest of the dregs he associated with had murdered him. Connor was not surprised, but he felt desperately sorry for his wife. By all accounts, she was very young, but a fine woman. Connor sat down to pen a reply, but for a long time, the words would not come. He thought of the final few bitter words he had had with his brother and tears came to his eyes. His father, with Connor's full support, had denied him his birthright and even entrance to his own home. Of course, he had the town house, but it was a tenth of the size. Thankfully, they had managed to keep his reputation intact, but Connor was not proud of the harsh means his father had used to do that either. He had persuaded his father to give Alasdair a monthly allowance, however.

"Father," Connor had said firmly, "if you give him nothing he will have to sell the house. He may gamble it away anyway, but we cannot prevent that. The only way we can stop him from gambling is to imprison him in the dungeon! It is a sickness - a disease of the mind!"

"And if he gambles it all away?" his father asked irritably, "what then? Is there no cure for this - sickness?"

Connor sighed. "None that I know of, Father," he shook his head sorrowfully, "I have asked the minister at the Kirk about it, and he says he will pray for him, and that we must pray too. He says that only God can cure him. I have prayed as hard as I can, but I have my spies out, and they say he has done nothing to stop himself from

playing cards - or drinking." He turned away and went to the window. "I hear that he has just started courting a lovely young maid called Rosina Buchanan. She is the heir to Dumbarton Castle, and if they marry he can lay claim to her fortune. Should we tell her about his drinking too? Some men become affectionate, some sleepy, some mean-spirited when they are in their cups, but Alasdair becomes violent, and it is not fair on the poor girl if she is not warned."

John McPhail put his head in his hands.

"What did I do to deserve this?" he asked wearily, "I had a wife in a thousand, Connor. I loved her so much. When she died in childbirth I was lost - devastated, and I also drank too much for a while, but as far as I know, I never took my anger out on anyone except myself. Was I a bad father, Connor? Truthfully?"

Connor went up to stand beside his father, then he put his arm around his shoulder

"Sometimes you felt things too much," he replied, "and I always wondered why. But now I realize that grief takes a long time to leave us. I never really knew my mother. I was only three when she died, and I was too young to understand. I used to wonder why you looked so sad sometimes, though. But you were a good father, and still are."

"Thank you, son." John covered Connor's hand with his own, and they smiled at each other.

Three months later his father was dead. There was a lavish funeral which Alasdair did not attend, and no apology was forthcoming for his absence. They told Connor that his father had most probably died of a heart attack, but Connor knew better. His father had died of a broken heart.

When the invitation had come for the wedding Connor was so busy that he barely acknowledged its presence, but put it away to be dealt with at a later stage. A week later he found it again and groaned. It read:

"To the Laird Connor McPhail

I have the pleasure of inviting you to the marriage of my daughter, Lady Rosina Buchanan, to your brother, Alasdair McPhail, on Sunday 24th of May 1760. We look forward to your attendance,

Your servant,

Laird Hugh Buchanan."

Connor sat for a long time thinking. There was no question of his going to the wedding - it did not even cross his mind to accept - so he sent a short, but polite refusal. After that, he wondered if he should tell Rosina about Alasdair's violent streak but after worrying about it for a while he put it away, intending to deal with it later. The truth was he had always wanted Rosina for himself, and seeing her married to his worthless brother would cause him more pain than he could bear. If he sent a letter to Rosina warning her about Alasdair she would only accuse him of being jealous. It was a terrifying thing to have to do, but he had been a coward. Rosina herself sent him several more letters, none of which he bothered to read, and eventually she gave up.

So here he was, contemplating whether or not to go to his only brother's funeral. He wondered if any attempt had been made to contact his children and grandchild. They should know, but his daughter Mairi and son William lived in Inverness, a long distance away, and by the time a message reached them it would be too late for them to come to the funeral. But he wrote to them anyway. Tears came to his eyes as he did so. 'He was my brother,' he thought, over and over again, 'we came from the same womb. How could we have been so different?'

He remembered times when they had gone kite-flying together, fished in the river for mackerel, and skiffed stones across its surface. They had gathered shells and found strange stones on the beach, then took them back to display in their rooms. They had learned their lessons together and Alisdair had helped him with his arithmetic and the

strange Latin words and grammar that he had to learn. To this day, he thought, with a soft laugh, he had no idea what earthly use it had. But his spelling was better than Alasdair's even though he was five years younger so he was able to repay the favor. Alasdair had taught him to swim and let him ride on the back of his horse, but all that ended when he was fourteen, and then he began to change from a boy to a man. Suddenly he was taller, stronger, hairier, his voice was deeper and he had no time for his irritating little brother. He was replaced by a series of kitchen maids, housemaids and eventually respectable young ladies, one of whom he eventually married when he was but nineteen. For some reason, his father was not pleased about the match, and it was only when he was much, much older than Connor had realized that Senga was with child with Alasdair when they wed.

He himself had never married. He told himself that he had never found the right woman, which was true, but he had also seen that Alasdair's marriage was not a happy one. Senga dutifully bore him two children, a boy, and a girl, then she had a stillbirth and died of childbed fever with her second daughter. The baby, two months premature, had lived for two months then died too, too small and weak to survive.

Connor decided, for his father's sake, to go to the funeral, not just for that reason, but to say goodbye to the brother he had loved and hated in equal measure. He could not do otherwise.

The Funeral

When he got to Dumbarton Castle Connor was greeted very civilly by the Laird, who came forward and took him by both hands, shaking them firmly.

"It is so good to see you here, Laird, and my condolences for your loss," he said sadly, "your brother was a fine man and would have been an asset to our family."

Connor bowed slightly.

"Thank you, Sir," he replied solemnly, "do you know what happened?"

"It is a bit of a tale," Hugh said heavily, "I do not quite know where to begin."

"I will begin," Rosina said, her head high, "I am surprised to see you here, Laird McPhail, since you did not deign to come to our wedding. What kept you away? Was it me?" Her blue eyes sparkled with a dangerous light, and he could tell that she still bore a grudge over his refusal to come to the wedding.

"Certainly not, my Lady," he assured her, as he bowed politely, "my brother and I had certain - differences - of a personal nature which need not concern you."

She almost quailed under his steady gaze. Like most people, she found Connor's calm demeanor quite unnerving. She took a deep breath and told him the carefully-constructed fictional story as quietly and straightforwardly as she could, trying not to let her voice tremble. It had been almost a week now but she could still not sleep. As soon as she fell into slumber she was assailed by dreams of Alasdair emerging from the darkness at the bottom of the bed or coming through the

window to stand over her and stare at her. It was guilt which would not stop plaguing her, and guilt was the reason that her eyes were red with weeping, not sadness, because she had realized that the man she had based her future on was a product of fantasy, and she was glad he was gone. By dying he had probably saved her from a lifetime of unhappiness.

Little did she know that Connor was feeling the same way. He was half-glad that his brother had died, then felt guilty for feeling that way, and he was ashamed of that. Damn him! Alasdair had caused so much misery.

Connor sighed as she finished her narrative.

"Do you think he suffered?"

She shook her head.

"Father and the doctor do not think so" she replied, "the head wound is the only one he has, and it is very deep, so they say that it was probably very sudden and he knew nothing."

"That is a mercy anyway," Connor said thankfully, "may I see him?"

Rosina shook her head again.

"He is already wrapped in winding sheets," she replied regretfully,

"Father advised me not to look at him, so I did not. He said it was better to remember him the way he was."

Connor made no reply beyond a slight nod. Just then the figure of Logan appeared, resplendent in his dress tartan and blue bonnet. He had been wearing the same clothes on her wedding night but she had been in such distress that had not noticed. He was taller than any other man in the room, and as their gazes locked she had a feeling that she was looking into a pair of cold suns. She had never seen such blue eyes. He came up to her, bowed and kissed her hand. He was wearing his usual stern expression, but now that she knew the heart of gold underneath, she did not find him so intimidating.

"*L*ady Rosina," his deep voice was soft, "I am so sorry for your loss. If there is anything I can do please let me know at once."

Rosina inclined her head graciously.

"Thank you, Laird Logan. Have you met Laird Connor McPhail, Alasdair's brother?"

"My condolences, sir," Logan said as the two men shook hands.

"Thank you, Sir," Connor replied with a slight smile. He looked as if he were about to say something else but was drawn away by another couple offering their sympathies.

"How are you?" Logan asked, frowning slightly.

"Well under the circumstances," she replied with a sigh, "and you?" she gazed up at him, her eyes full of meaning.

"I am well," he smiled slightly, "but it is the strangest and most terrifying thing I have ever done. I hope I shall never have to do anything like it again."

"*T*hank you for everything," she whispered, "you are a good man, and I am privileged to know you."

He bowed again.

"My pleasure, Lady Rosina," he said, then walked away, wishing he could have wrapped his arms around her for comfort - not for her, but for him. But, he reminded himself sternly, that path lay behind him and he would not travel it again.

Rosina sighed inwardly. She would have welcomed the strength of Logan's strong arms around her. Connor watched both of them covertly, thinking how close they were. Logan Fraser had a reputation for being a dour and stern man, but when he looked at Rosina he was not that man at all. He did not know if Alasdair had loved Rosina, but he was sure that she had loved him. He wondered if he could court her once the mourning period was over. He had loved and wanted her for so long, and after all, did they not both need comfort now?

When they went into the chapel, six of the biggest and strongest men carried the coffin. It was a very plain and simple place, having been stripped of all its decorative carvings, images and statues after the Reformation, but the graceful arches and high ceilings still remained. It was a beautiful day, and the sunlight streamed through the mullioned windows, illuminating the satin sheen of the oak coffin standing, solitary and sad at the front of the altar. The minister was a stern, solemn man whose wrinkled face expressed his belief that life was to be endured and not enjoyed. He extolled the merits of a godly life and clean living and expressed the hope that Alasdair's soul had ascended into heaven. Rosina and Logan doubted that very much, but Connor still held out a faint hope. Maybe God in His mercy would be kind to him. Hopefully one day he would meet his brother in paradise. During the service Rosina only managed to keep her composure with some difficulty. Part of her wanted to scream and thump her fists on the coffin, but there was another part that grieved for the happiness they might have shared and the children that might have been born if only Alasdair had been kind.

After the service had finished they went to the family graveyard in the little cemetery just outside the castle walls. Rosina had drawn her black veil over her face, and she was silent and dry-eyed as the minister drearily intoned the final prayers over Alasdair's body. She took a handful of earth and sprinkled it over the coffin, then watched as everyone else did the same. When the last 'Amen' had been said she walked into the castle for the wake but could not face everyone's sympathetic gazes. She felt like such a hypocrite, mourning for a man she had just killed. When Maisie came in, Rosina had never been so glad to see anyone.

Maisie looked at Rosina's pallid face and asked her if she had a headache. Rosina nodded, wincing. Maisie led her to her bedroom after making her excuse to the Laird, then made her lie on

her bed.

"I will fetch you some Valerian tea, Mistress," she said, then, when Rosina tried to get up, she gently pushed her back down again, "I am the nurse and you are my patient, Mistress," she warned, "it is best that you listen to me. Close your eyes and rest for a while." Rosina closed her eyes and kept them closed for twelve hours.

Maisie and Hugh

After the funeral, with all its attendant preparations and ceremonies, followed by feasting and endless small talk, the castle seemed to be enveloped in a shroud of gloom. For months Rosina had looked forward to her wedding, but after Alasdair's death, there was only guilt and depression, followed a horrible sense of anticlimax. She was sorry that she had killed him, but only for Connor's sake. For her own, she was beginning to care less and less. He had been plain and simply a bad man.

After a few days of trying to prise Rosina out of her depression, Maisie decided that the best thing to do was to consult Hugh and ask his advice. She went to his office and he bade her sit down then looked at her kindly across the desk.

"How are you, my Laird? " she smiled. She had always liked her employer, but now even he looked a little low in spirits.

"In truth, I could be better, lass," he sighed, "and you?"

"I am well, my Laird, but worried about Mistress Rosina," she paused, frowning, "she is depressed and sad, Sir, and although it is understandable as she is recently bereaved, there is something more. I cannot explain it. She seems very lonely."

"She has you to talk to," Hugh pointed out.

"She does, and we do talk, but I think she needs the occasional society of a young man." She looked at him frankly, "sometimes a young lady

needs to be admired, flattered, told she is beautiful, just to lift her spirits. In the mistress's case it would not be a lie. She is very beautiful."

The Laird look thoughtful for a moment.

"Who did you have in mind?" he asked curiously.

"Connor McPhail, Logan Fraser, any other eligible young men."

The Laird frowned disgustedly and made a gesture of dismissal with his right hand.

"Fraser! That big dour lump!" he said scornfully, "I'll not have him courting my daughter!"

Maisie sighed. It was just the reaction she had expected.

"I did not mean 'courting, 'my Laird," she replied, choosing her words carefully, "just calling upon her from time to time to ask after her. There are some young ladies who could visit too."

The Laird put his head on one side, then nodded slowly.

"I think you are right," he put his elbow on the desk and put his chin in his hand laid his chin on his hand, "she will be ready to marry again if she chooses after three months of mourning, and I believe that my Rosina is passionate and loving enough to do just that!"

He smiled at Maisie.

"You are good for her, lass. She said to me once that she could not imagine life without you."

Maisie was taken aback.

"I am flattered, sir!"

"Then go and work your magic!" he ordered, "but she must not know that I approve. She thinks her father is in his dotage and far too old for such things!"

Maisie giggled.

"Why !" my Laird, she said warmly, "you are in the prime of your life!"

Then, to her utter amazement Hugh bowed, kissed her hand, and with a twinkle in his eye said:

"*Thank* you, Milady!" Then he straightened up and looked at her with an expression of admiration that was absolutely unmistakable. He was flirting with her! She left very quickly indeed.

Maisie went away from the encounter with a flush in her cheeks. She felt a strange glow inside and wondered if she had imagined the last few moments. She looked at her fingertips where he had kissed her, still feeling a tingle where his lips had brushed against them. He was clean-shaven, but a man's skin was always rougher than a woman's, and she had felt a slight rasp of stubble against her fingers. She gave a little gasp. This was the Laird - her employer! Surely her wildly racing heartbeat and blushing cheeks could not have been caused by him. Then she began to count, and realized that he was not yet fifty. He was tall and upright, with a thick thatch of light brown hair that was only now beginning to be threaded with gray. There were laugh lines around his eyes and his mouth and he wore an earring in his left ear. He was a very attractive man - why had she not seen it before? Her eyes flew open as reality set in and she told herself not to be so foolish. He was her employer. He paid her salary, and that was not going to change. She reprimanded herself for her little flight of fancy then smiled. Life was hard enough - why not indulge herself with a few dreams?

Hugh was equally amazed at his own reaction. He had always admired Maisie. Everything about her was tasteful and refined. She was a talented pianist, spoke several languages fluently and had almost no local accent. She was intelligent and accomplished and had the enviable ability to do many things extremely well. She had sewed Rosina's wedding dress entirely by herself, she braided her hair and even mixed her medicines for her. She never complained, but discharged her duties in a quiet, competent way that at once made her invisible and indispensable. Then he pulled himself up short. What was he thinking? She was an upper-level servant, for goodness sake! But he felt troubled that he was so attracted to a woman who was so obviously from a lower rung of society than he was. It had never

happened before, but it reminded him of one thing. His wife

*h*ad been dead for twelve years now and it was past time he took another. He was not yet an old man and he prided himself on still being, if not quite in the first flush of youth, reasonably attractive to women. He still had time to beget a few more children and he would dearly love to have a son. And Maisie was so beautiful - if he had been in a crowd of strangers and put her in an expensive dress not one of his friends would have known the difference. He shook his head as he looked out of the window, lost in thought. He stood for a long time, but eventually, he thought of other things and abandoned the little daydream. He might marry again, but there seemed to be no suitable woman in sight. But as he was falling asleep that night, hers was the last face he saw and the first one he dreamed about.

A Proposal

Rosina finally decided to snap out of her broodiness of her own accord. The castle was holding back any hope she had of forgetting her unpleasant memories so she decided to get away for a while. The unrest caused by the Jacobite rebellion had almost ceased, so it was safe to travel north, but two women could not do that unless accompanied by an armed escort. This her father could provide, but for some reason, he was dragging his feet. Every time Rosina asked him about lending her some of his garrison he was busy with his accounts, going to visit farmers, consulting with his stewards or going to market.

Eventually, Rosina had had enough. She burst into her father's office one day to confront him.

"Father," she said firmly, "I am here and I am not going ANYWHERE till you tell me what is going on. I have tried to speak to you six times in the last ten days and you have fobbed me off with one feeble excuse after another! Is there a reason for this? Are you angry with me?"

Hugh sat leaning his head on his hand, elbow on the desk.

"I just do not feel that you are safe," he said, avoiding her eyes.

"I have not decided where to go yet!" she stood up and spread out her hands, then leaned over to face him. "Tell me the real reason, please."

He hesitated, then looked up.

"Promise me that you will not think that I am very, very foolish for what I am about to say."

"I don't know what it is yet!" She laughed.

Again he hesitated, this time for so long that Rosina began to be alarmed.

"Father - what is wrong?" she covered his hand with hers. She was astonished at what he said next, but she did not laugh.

Hugh sat upright and looked straight into her eyes.

"Do you think that Maisie would consent to marry me?" he asked.

Rosina gasped.

"What?" her voice was a squeak, "Maisie? My Maisie?"

"Do you know any other?"

She sat back and looked at him fixedly, her eyes wide with shock. It took a moment for her to regain the power of speech.

"This is all very sudden," she said at last, "you will have to ask her, not me - but Father - why Maisie? She is a very worthy bride but I am very surprised. I thought you would have asked a gentlewoman, someone like - well, like us."

"In my eyes, she is a gentlewoman," he replied quietly. "We have both known her for a long time and I know you have always loved her as a sister. I have never thought of her as anything but your companion, but a few weeks ago she came to see me because she was worried about you, and I - I seemed to see her with new eyes. Suddenly she was not just the person who helped you, but a sweet, caring woman with a generous heart and good humor. She has many talents and accomplishments too, and I would be proud to call her my wife."

"And that is why you do not wish us to leave?"

Hugh nodded.

"I had this fanciful notion that we might have a child too," his voice was scornful, "I must forget that I ever had the notion. It is foolish."

Rosina went to him and clasped his hands in hers.

"Ask her," she said quietly, "I promise you, Father, Maisie will be honest with you. She will do what is in her heart."

At that moment there was a knock at the door and the Laird answered it. Maisie curtsied to him, blushing.

"Pardon me, Sir, I was looking for the Lady Rosina," she smiled at them both. She was wearing a bottle green riding habit and looked the epitome of elegance. Rosina looked at her father, raised her eyebrows questioningly and ushered Maisie into the room.

"Father wants to talk to you for a moment," she said calmly, "I will meet you in the stables."

Maisie frowned and turned to face Hugh. Since those uncomfortable few moments in his office, she had kept any meetings between them to the bare minimum and greeted him in a polite, formal tone, keeping her eyes down the whole time. Now here she was, isolated and vulnerable, in the presence of a man whom she had grown to like, if not love, and to whom she was enormously attracted. She curtsied, took one wary glance at him then lowered her gaze to the floor.

He poured a glass of whiskey for himself and offered her one.

"I don't drink whiskey during the day, my Laird," she shook her head and pushed the glass away, "and hardly ever at night unless it's a special occasion."

"It is a special occasion," he assured her. He poured her a tiny measure. She sipped it, then looked up at him, her face troubled.

"Have I done something wrong my Laird?" she asked.

"By no means, lass," he replied with a reassuring smile, "and I'm sorry if you thought that," he paused. "I wanted to ask you something."

She looked at him enquiringly.

"I would be happy to answer any question you like, my Laird," she replied.

"Maisie, are you happy here?"

Maisie's face lit up with a beaming smile.

"*Very* much so, my Laird," she answered' "I cannot imagine being anywhere else."

"Don't be shocked at what I am going to say now," he walked around the desk and pulled her to her feet, "Maisie, will you do me the honor of being my wife?"

Maisie's knees buckled, and if it were not for Hugh's hands grasping her upper arms she might have fallen. She stared at him for a long time, unable to speak, while he gently helped her into a chair, then she swallowed the rest of her wine in one long gulp. She put a hand on her chest, trying to stop her heart racing. Eventually, she found her voice.

"*B*ut my L-"

"Call me Hugh," he said gently, "it's my name."

"It's a fine name," she was almost crying now, "but you are my master. I cannot call you that."

"I don't want to be your master," he said gently, "I want to be your husband. I want to make you Lady Buchanan, and I want you to have my children."

Her expression softened.

"I would love to have children."

"Do you like me, Maisie?" he asked. "I don't mean 'do you love me?' because that is too much to ask. Just tell me you like me."

"Everyone likes you, my Laird."

"But do you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then will you think about it?" he put out a hand to stroke her silky dark hair while she stood, tense and immobile. Then she grasped his wrist and took it away from her face, shaking her head.

"*No*, my Laird, I will not," she answered solemnly, "I thank you very much for the honor and I am extremely flattered, but while I like you very much I cannot love you. I know that few marriages are love matches, but this is something on which I cannot compromise. Please forgive me, my Laird."

He nodded slowly.

"I am sorry to have caused you such embarrassment, Maisie. Please go and enjoy your ride."

"Thank you, my Laird," she replied, then curtsied and left.

Logan's Thoughts

Rosina had been waiting for her at the entrance to the stables wondering what had been said and how Maisie had reacted. Knowing Maisie, she thought, she had tucked it away neatly for later consideration and no trace would show on her face. Rosina was right.

When Maisie walked over to her she did nothing out of the ordinary at all, and her face as calm as ever.

"What did my father want?" Rosina asked as they set off.

Maisie smiled at her and shook her head.

"Mistress," she said, a slight reproof in her voice, "we have known each other a long time. You know what your father wanted."

Rosina nodded slowly, looking straight ahead. When she spoke she kept her voice level and without emotion.

"I do know, but what did you say?"

"I said no!" She paused, then rushed on, "how long has he been thinking this way?"

Rosina shrugged.

"Only in the last few months, I think," she looked at Maisie keenly. "He has been lonely. He loved my mother very much," she thought for a moment, then went on: "but I think he has been looking for someone with the same qualities as she had - and you have got them."

"So I would just be a replacement," Maisie said evenly.

"He says that you are entirely different in character," Rosina looked at her, "do you think you could care for him? I do not mean 'love him' - not yet. But have enough affection for him to be his wife?"

Maisie replied immediately.

"No. He is a lovely man, Mistress, but my path does not go the same way as his."

Her cheeks were flushed and there was a slight frown on her face.

"Did you tell him that?"

"Yes. It's only fair."

They rode on in companionable silence for a while, before seeing another rider in the distance trotting towards them.

"Logan Fraser," Rosina said quietly, "I wonder what he is doing here?"

Logan reined in beside them, bowed in the saddle and looked solemnly at Rosina.

"How are you, my Lady?" he asked, politely.

"Well my Laird, and you?"

"Well, thank you," he replied politely, and Rosina realized that far from being a being a man who was dour and expressionless, because he was in a constant ill-humor, he was almost painfully shy. To do what he had done for her must have been sheer agony for him, and at once her respect for him rose tenfold.

"Were you going to see my father?" she asked.

"Aye. Is he at home?" he was frowning again.

"Yes, he is," she smiled at him again and to her utter amazement and enchantment, he blushed. This tall, strong, muscular man with the strong Celtic features actually blushed like a girl.

"*I* I can't stop thinking about what we did," he said painfully as if every word were being squeezed out of him. "I wondered if..." he

looked up as if to seek help and his blue eyes blazed into hers with a desperate plea in them.

"If you could come and talk about it?" she asked softly, putting a hand over his on the saddle. Immediately his closed around hers in a hard,

rough grasp. "Of course you can - Father is going to be way most of next week seeing livestock in Edinburgh so it will be quiet here. Will you have time then?"

"Aye. In the afternoon."

"Say, Monday?"

"Fine, I will be there," he replied, bowing to them. "Good day, Lady Rosina, Miss."

As they rode on, Maisie asked: "was that my imagination or did he blush as red as a strawberry?"

Rosina nodded.

"He blushed, and I have never seen a man doing that before, Maisie," she looked back, but he was far away now, though she could still see the sunlight blazing on his shining black hair. "He is not moody, or difficult, or always angry. He is scared. He is very, very shy."

Rosina had no idea how scared he was. What he had done for her had not only been dangerous, it had been against every instinct he possessed. His character was to shun people, to stay in the background and keep them at a distance by presenting such a formidable face to the world that nobody wanted to even engage him in conversation. On the odd occasion when people did, he had developed the art of exchanging a few words then making a quick excuse to leave. He was dreading Monday, but he had to see Rosina again, to make some sense out of what they had done together. It all seemed like a bad dream, and indeed he was plagued with them too, nightmares in which

Alasdair came back from the dead and tried to kill him with a candlestick. He sighed. Presently he got to the castle and was permitted to see Laird Hugh. The Laird shook hands with him and offered him a glass of whisky. Again, Logan refused it.

"I am sorry, Sir, I forgot," he smiled at Logan. They had business to discuss about a piece of land that lay on the borders of both their estates and the matter may have led to tension between their houses if left unchecked. They settled their differences amicably, though, and although Hugh was uncomfortable with Logan, as indeed was everyone else he knew, he invited Logan to dinner with the family anyway. Logan raised his eyebrows in surprise, but he was always ready with a regretful reply, as he was now.

"Thank you, sir, that is kind of you, but I cannot accept," he said regretfully. "I am not dressed for the occasion," he stood up and bowed. "Another time perhaps."

"*I* will hold you to that," Hugh escorted him out, smiling, "we hardly ever see you. I was surprised that you were at the wedding and funeral."

"I am not a very sociable man," Logan was making every effort he could to open the door and get away, but Hugh was blocking his path.

He had better not tell him about his appointment with Rosina on Monday, he thought, or he would insist on him coming in his Great Kilt for dinner. Logan could not imagine anything he would less rather do. He edged around the Laird and opened the door, letting himself out. The Laird's manservant escorted him outside and he went to the stables to collect his horse, where he ran into Rosina and Maisie coming back from their ride. He helped Rosina to dismount then tried to say goodbye again.

"Stay for dinner, Laird Logan," she said pleasantly, "we are having venison tonight."

"Thank you, but I cannot," he backed off and got on his horse. "Good day, ladies."

Then he was gone.

"You know, Maisie," Rosina remarked, "I am beginning to be heartily sick of seeing the back of that man's head and his horse's behind!"

Talking to Logan

"Father," Rosina said wearily, "that Logan Fraser wears me out. I can't make head nor tail of him!"

The Laird laughed.

"Aye, he's a strange lot, that's for certain sure!" they were having dinner in the small dining room overlooking the river.

"He's shy, really," she observed. She could not make her mind up if she liked Logan, but he had certainly had an effect on her - those blue eyes seemed to mesmerize her, but she had a feeling that they did that to a lot of people.

"I expect Maisie told you her answer to me?" Hugh asked, keeping his head down.

"Yes, but do not be too hard on her, Father," she replied, "a Laird and a ladies' maid is very unusual although I agree with you that she is a fine woman."

"She is that," he sighed, "and I have a fine daughter. I should be content."

Rosina shrugged.

"Why?" she smiled at him, "Father, you are a man like any other - of course, you want a son! You may not get one but you may yet find another wonderful lady. Maisie is not the only fish in the sea!"

Rosina privately thought what a pity it was that Maisie could not see fit to become her father's wife. It would have been fun to play mother and daughter.

"Aye, you are right, lass," he said wearily, "but maybe it is not in God's plan for me!"



*A*s Rosina was waiting for Logan she was sitting in one of the big front rooms looking upriver towards Glasgow, watching the river traffic. The many-masted ships never failed to fascinate her, sailing to Scotland's biggest town and commercial hub, Glasgow, with cargoes such as tobacco, sugar, tea, and cotton. She could only imagine the places these exotic goods came from, places with names like Jamaica, Virginia, and even China. She had heard of places where people's skins were dark brown, and she had once seen a Chinese woman with beautiful almond-shaped eyes and long shiny hair.

But the river here was very shallow, and she knew that the really big ocean-going ships unloaded at Greenock and Port Glasgow further down towards the sea, and transferred their exotic cargoes onto the smaller, nimbler craft. After Greenock, the mighty River Clyde flowed west and south, past the islands of Arran, Bute, Cumbrae and Little Cumbrae and into the Atlantic Ocean. If anyone had asked Rosina where she was from, she would not have said 'Scotland' first, but Clydeside. She knew that the Highlands of her country were very beautiful, and she had been to Perth, Inverness, Aberdeen and Dundee many times, but she was a Lowlander, and proud of it. Still, she reflected, it would be pleasant to go to their little house near Fort William again. She and Maisie would go as soon as they could.

*J*ust as she was mulling this over the door opened and Logan came in, dusty and work-worn as usual. He never looked like a Laird, she thought - more like one of his tenant farmers! But none of them had his commanding height, and she would have been very surprised

to find any of them with eyes like his.

"Laird Logan! How good to see you!" she went forward to greet him with a little curtsey while he bowed, hands clasped behind his back.

"And you, Lady Rosina," the corners of his mouth twitched up and for a moment she thought that he actually might smile, but the expression did not reach his eyes. Rosina ordered some tea and then beckoned him to the window.

"I am always sorry that my bedroom does not have this view," she said sadly, "it faces the mountain behind us. I could sit here for hours. I always think of this as my river, as if I own it because I love it so much. Don't you think it's a splendid view?"

He looked down at her smiling face, flushed with enthusiasm and for the first time in an age, he felt the urge to actually kiss a woman. He was suddenly - what? Relieved? That was something he had last done so long ago he could hardly remember what it felt like, and he had thought sometimes that he had lost all the urges that made him a man.

"It is indeed," he agreed, then he looked down at himself. "I am sorry for my appearance, but until lately I have had no need of any clothes for afternoon wear. I never usually call on people."

"It's of no matter at all," she replied, waving the matter aside, "it is not what is outside, but what is inside. Do people call on you?" she asked. The tea had arrived and she was pouring it as she spoke. He made a noise that might have been a humorless laugh.

"No, Lady Rosina," he answered, but said nothing more. He added about a teaspoonful of milk then sipped the tea and put it down. Rosina felt sorry for him.

"Do you have any family hereabouts?" she asked, by way of polite conversation. He shook his head.

"No," he replied heavily.

"What? Nobody near here or nobody at all?" An awful feeling was beginning to ball up in her stomach. He looked grim.

"My father died five years ago of some or other fever, my mother long before him," he sighed, "and I am the only living child. No -" he put his hand up as she opened her mouth to speak, but he shook his head. "No pity, please. It is just the way things are."

*R*osina nodded, but her heart was aching for him.

"*You* will wed some beautiful maid sometime, I am sure," she smiled, trying to inject a little levity into the conversation.

"Perhaps," he drank the rest of his tea in one draught. She thought how ridiculously large his hands were against the delicate daintiness of the china cup, but the contrast only seemed to highlight his helplessness.

"More?" she asked politely.

"Thank you, no."

Rosina sat back in her chair and looked at him frankly.

"We share a terrible secret," she said quietly.

"We do," he agreed. "Do you dream about it?"

"Yes, terrible dreams. You?"

He nodded.

"Yes. And Maisie?" he looked around. "Where is she?"

"She is doing something for my father," Rosina answered quickly, "she sometimes has dreams, but not as bad as mine. Neither of you actually k-killed him..." she tailed off, and put her hand over her lips so that he could not see them trembling.

"I know something of what you are feeling," his voice was very gentle, "I thought I could feel him moving as I carried him downstairs and

when I put him down I was sure he was going to reach out and try to strangle me."

"You didn't hear the noise the candlestick made when -" she could not say the next words, "it was a noise I will hear in my worst nightmares forever!" she began to cry quietly, and he wished he could put his arms around her, but that was never going to happen. It was too late. For a moment he was silent, then he knelt down in front of her on the carpet.

"*He* was drunk and mad," he said sadly, "he might have killed you, and if he had done that they would have hanged him anyway. You must also think of all the people who love you - your father, Maisie - perhaps even Connor. Maybe Connor will marry you. He is a very eligible man."

He was talking rubbish and he knew it, but he had no experience in talking to women.

"And you? Would you marry me?" she was half-joking, smiling through her tears, but immediately his face changed as if a blind had come down on it, shuttering off all expression.

"*Forget* me," he said grimly, "I am a lost cause."

A Conversation

"*Why?*" she asked, puzzled, "why are you a lost cause?"

He sighed and ran his hair backward through his dark hair.

"*I* is a long story, Lady Rosina, and I am not going to burden you with it," suddenly he looked very tired. "Suffice to say that if you knew the truth about me you would not want to be seen in my company."

She changed the subject completely then, not liking the way the conversation was going.

"Where were you born, Laird Logan?"

"Fort Augustus, a tiny wee place near Inverness," he replied, "my father inherited land there and bought the castle down here. When I was old enough I took over the running of the Lowland one in Renton, Castle Fraser."

"Can we stop being so formal?" she asked suddenly, "I am Rosina - you can call me Rosie if you like, and you are Logan. Do you agree?"

He nodded, and the corners of his mouth twitched upward.

"You almost smiled," she said mischievously, "do you think you could do it again? Go on, I dare you!"

He looked at her for a moment then he did smile. For the first time, he treated her to the widest, most sparkling smile she had ever seem.

"*I*'s like the sun coming out," she said in wonder. She stepped forward and put a fingertip in the dimples on each of his cheeks. He laughed softly, wishing he could allow himself to kiss her.

"You are an easy person to smile at," he told her, then he frowned and

looked down at his hands, which were clenched very tightly together. "What we did will never leave us, but it is a bond that we share. If you ever tell anyone, tell them about my part too, for I am also partly to blame."

She looked up into his sky-blue eyes and said:

"Whatever we have shared today will never leave this room, Logan. And if you ever want to talk to me about why you are a lost cause I will listen." Then she said, "and if you ever want to smile again you can come here - I won't tell anyone - I promise!"

He laughed, then bowed and kissed her hand.

"Thank you - Rosie."

When he left, Logan felt as if a lead weight had been taken off his shoulders. He felt free, and for the first time in an age his heart, mind, and body had been stirred by a woman. Then he remembered. He was a lost cause, and always would be. As soon as Rosina found out his secret, she would also want nothing to do with him. Besides, he had had his heart broken once before, and that was once too many.

Meanwhile, Malcolm was chatting idly with one of the grooms from Rosina's stables. It seemed that there was still a lot of interest in the subject of Alasdair's murder. They were drinking ale, and Malcolm was once again defending Logan's character.

"Sure he's a miserable big galoot!" Donald said, taking another hefty swig of beer. He was a small skinny man with receding red hair, small gray eyes and a perennially malevolent expression, who had never been known to say a good word about anyone.

"Aye, he disnae' present a guid face tae the world, but he's got a heart o' gold, I tell ye," Malcolm replied.

Donald sniffed.

"Ye hear whit they're sayin' about him?"

Malcolm cast his eyes heavenwards.

"Naw, but I expect ye're gaunnae' tell me!"

After another long draught of ale, Donald wiped his lips on his sleeve.

"They say he wis the ane who killed the Laird Mc Phail's son."

Malcolm was shocked, but he laughed it off. It was, of course, a joke, but it was not even slightly funny, and it was in extremely poor taste.

"Oh, aye! And who's sayin' this then?" he said scornfully, "yer Granny's ghost?"

"*N*aw," Donald replied, "Archie MacPherson the blacksmith, and he heard it fae' yon lassie doon at the bakery. It's a' over the toon."

"An' the lassie at the bakery heard it fae her uncle's brother-in-law's second best friend I expect?" Malcolm said scathingly, "awa' before I skelp ye ane!" he said scathingly.

"Naw!" Donald retorted, "it wis from Big Sam, yon hefty fella that helps the Laird and the blacksmith sometimes. He was there! So there - put that in yer pipe an' smoke it!"

"*A*ye - and why have they no' arrested the laird yet then?" Malcolm was so close to Donald that he could have spat on or struck him, but the little man did not back down.

"Who knows whit these clever folks dae?" Donald shrugged.

Malcolm threw his head back and laughed.

"So ye're tellin' me that a perfectly innocent man should hang because your pal thought he might hae' caught a wee glimpse o' somethin' in black darkness?"

"He's a laird," Donald said bitterly, flapping his hand at Malcolm, "they never hang lairds!"

"NAW!" Malcolm roared, "THEY BEHEID THEM! Only a few years ago two Jacobites had their heids chopped aff, and dinna' think they

widnae' dae it again, proof or nae proof!" He was not exactly sure if they still beheaded people, but it sounded good just saying it.

Donald shuffled backward, eyes wide with fright.

"Calm doon!" he made a placatory gesture, "I'm jist tellin' ye whit I heard!"

Malcolm's face was red with rage. Logan had always treated him with the utmost kindness, even though he was not the most demonstrative of men. With one last poisonous look at Donald, he went upstairs to tell Logan the news, only to find he had been listening to the whole conversation from the top of the stairwell.

"*D*id you hear?" Malcolm asked quietly. Logan nodded, biting his lips in agitation and thinking.

"*I* must tell Rosina," he said at last, "I do not want her to be unprepared when she hears this."

"Aye," Malcolm said, nodding, "an' I dinnae believe a word o' it, Laird Logan."

Logan patted him on the shoulder.

"Thank you, Malcolm. It is much appreciated."

He sprinted back up the stairs again, taking them two at a time and was about to knock on the door when Rosina came out and collided with him. For a moment their bodies touched each other, then they sprang apart.

"Did you forget something?" she asked, alarmed.

"Rosie," he said, taking her by the shoulders, "I have bad news."

A Plan

"*B*efore I say anything, I want to tell you not to interrupt," he said firmly, "can you promise me that?"

"I promise," she whispered, looking at his grim expression with trepidation.

He took a deep breath and sat her down on a couch, then sat down beside her.

"Apparently somebody saw me putting Alasdair's body in the ditch," he put a finger to her lips as she started to speak. "I said don't talk, Rosie."

Just then, there was a knock on the door and Maisie came in. She saw Logan and frowned, then spoke to Rosina.

"Are you all right, Mistress?" she asked anxiously, "you look so pale."

Logan stood up to give Maisie his seat, then gave her the same instructions he had given Rosina. He gave her a brief explanation of what had transpired, and she put her hand to her lips then sucked in a breath.

"I do not know if this is just a rumor," he said wearily, pushing his hand back through his hair in a gesture that was becoming familiar to them, "or if someone really did see me."

Maisie was the first to speak.

"Who is the person who said he saw you?"

"Big Sam, an occasional casual worker for your father, Malcolm says."

"Oh, him!" Maisie said scathingly, "he's an idiot."

"I should confess," Rosina said suddenly, jumping up from her chair, "or you will suffer the blame."

"Indeed you will not!" Logan thundered, "we have to think."

"I will tell my father," she was crying now, "he will know what to do."

Maisie put an arm around her shoulders.

"*M*istress, do you remember why we did not tell him at once?" She was looking directly into Rosina's eyes, "because he is a good man, but a sensitive one. This would eat him up. It would haunt him forever. Then both of you would feel guilty for all time."

Rosina buried her head on Maisie's shoulder and burst into sobs. Maisie allowed the weeping to run its course while Logan paced the floor restlessly.

"What have I done?" She put her hands over her face, "I have ruined your life!"

"You have not!" Logan said sternly, "what I did was of my own free will, Rosie!"

Logan stood over her for a moment then knelt down. He almost gave in to the temptation to haul her into his arms and thanked the stars that Maisie was there to stop him.

"*M*ay I make a suggestion, my Laird?" Maisie asked.

"Please do," he sounded relieved that she was taking the initiative.

"Stay here tonight," she said, looking at Rosina, "if Mistress Rosina and the Laird permit, of course. Have Malcolm ride into Dumbarton tomorrow and see what he can find out."

Logan looked thoughtful.

"That is a good idea, Maisie, thank you," he looked at Rosina, who was looking a bit more hopeful.

"I will tell Father you are staying to dinner," she said, smiling tearfully again. "Logan - I am sorry for all the weeping!"

He shrugged, and the corners of his mouth twitched upwards.

"I have seen women weeping before!" He looked out of the window. The late afternoon sunshine was beginning to redden and the shadows were lengthening.

"I need to speak to Malcolm," he said hurriedly, "excuse me, ladies."

He disappeared like a whirlwind out of the door leaving Rosina and Maisie to digest what had just happened.

"*He* called you 'Rosie'" Maisie said brightly, to lighten the mood.

"I asked him to," Rosina admitted.

"That is your family's name for you."

"Yes," Rosina mused, "it is." But she said no more.

When Logan saw Malcolm, he was on his own, since Donald had gone away in high dudgeon.

"Malcolm, I need you to do something for me," he said grimly, "I need you to keep this very secret, do you understand? Not one of your family - nobody should know."

Malcolm sighed and put his hands on Logan's shoulders.

"Master," he said affectionately, "you saved my bairn's life. I wid dae onything for ye."

"Thank you, Malky," Logan let out a deep breath. "I am not coming back with you tonight. Don't give anyone an excuse - they don't need to know where I am. Tomorrow I would like you to go to Dumbarton and see what you can find out about this rumor."

"*Why*, Sir?"

"Because I did dispose of that body," he replied heavily. "I did not kill him, and all I can tell you is that he was not murdered, and there was good reason for what I did. Do you trust me, Malky?"

Malcolm nodded.

"I aye have and I aye will, sir."

"I will meet you in the forest tomorrow, just by the crossroads. Whistle for me - I will be among the trees."

Malcolm mounted his horse.

"Goodnight and good luck, Sir," he said mischievously, "and enjoy your dinner!"

Malcolm rode back to Fraser Castle thinking about what his Laird had asked him to do. He would have to be very subtle and not too intrusive, but he was sure that he could do it. Indeed, he would do anything for Logan. Five years before, when his daughter was a little child of six, they had been collecting shellfish on the seashore when she walked in too far and a wave had come and swept her away. Logan, who was not normally part of these expeditions, had taken a fancy to collect some himself that day. Malcolm could not swim, but Logan was a strong swimmer, and he pulled her out before any damage had been done. From that day forward Jeannie had idolized the Laird and included him in her prayers every night. Malcolm had thought ever since that he was a guardian angel. He could only speculate on Logan's words and wonder what they meant. He had heard descriptions of the body and unless it was a freak accident or suicide he could not imagine the Laird's meaning in saying that it was not murder. But he would do what he could. He sighed. If he had the choice he would never work for anyone else but Logan Fraser.

Dinner at Rosie's

When Hugh heard that Logan was coming for dinner after all he raised his eyebrows and said archly:

"For a man who is supposed to be very antisocial, he is making himself very available to you, Rosie."

Rosina sighed.

"Father," she shook her head and smiled at him, "if you are suggesting what I think you are, put it out of your mind. Laird Fraser and I have no interest in each other in a romantic sense."

"Then why has he become such a frequent visitor?"

Rosina cast her eyes heavenward.

"Father, when did you become such an old woman?" she asked, laughing, "Logan and I are friends, and he is thinking about accompanying Maisie and me to our northern property for our safety."

Hugh looked doubtful.

"And are you sure you are safe with him?"

"I am."

"Where is he?" Hugh looked around himself as if Logan would be found hiding behind the dresser.

"He is washing," she replied, "and Father, he is in working clothes, so do not be offended. He didn't know I was going to ask him to dinner with us."

Hugh sighed.

"It is well past time that man got himself rigged out with some more

appropriate clothes," he said grumpily, "he looks like a scarecrow."

Just then, Logan entered the room.

"*You* are right, Sir," he agreed, "but until the last month I have had no need of presentable clothes, and no doubt I will have little need of them again."

Hugh was rather stuck for something to say for a moment, but Rosina jumped up and offered Logan a chair.

"Whiskey? Wine?" she asked politely.

He held his hand up.

"I don't indulge, Milady, but thank you."

Hugh sipped his whiskey and ordered water for Logan.

"Why do you not drink spirits or ale, Sir?" he asked curiously.

Logan turned his fierce blue gaze on him and said firmly: "because I choose not to, Laird Buchanan."

Hugh's mouth opened, then closed again with a snap. He was not pleased. Logan, remembering that he was speaking to his host, mended the situation quickly.

"My apologies for my rudeness Sir, but the matter is a sensitive one for me. Please pardon me."

Hugh inclined his head graciously, and the awkward moment passed.

The first course consisted of scallops filled with potatoes and topped with cheese sauce.

"My compliments to your chef, Lady Rosina," Logan said courteously, "these are wonderful."

Rosina smiled as she watched Logan eat heartily. She loved to watch a man enjoying his food.

"I will tell her, and she will be delighted. She is a lovely woman - one of our treasures. But my Maisie of course, is my biggest treasure of all."

The second course was roast lamb that was so tender it melted in the mouth, accompanied by braised vegetables moistened with gravy.

Logan had to stop himself from bolting it down with unbecoming haste, but Rosina had seen his face when the food was brought in,

And when he had cleared his plate, she asked him if he would like a second helping.

"Yes, please, Lady Rosina," he replied gratefully, "if it is no inconvenience."

Hugh laughed.

"Indeed it is not," he replied, "it is grand to see a man who appreciates his food as much as you do, Laird Logan. I think I will join you."

The two men began to work their way through another plate of food with relish, and while her father was flagging towards the end, Logan ate his way through it with concentrated dedication. When he had cleared his plate once more Rosina raised her eyebrows and looked at him.

"No more, Milady," he replied, and smiled at her as if she were the only woman in the world. She smiled back, and for a timeless moment, there were only two of them in the room. Then Rosina's father gave a discreet cough.

The third course consisted of delicate curd tartlets smothered in fresh cream, and when he had eaten three, Logan pronounced himself satisfied.

"I have not eaten so well for months," he pronounced in tones of deep satisfaction, "thank you, Laird Hugh, Lady Rosina. It was a fine meal."

"Would you like to try drinking something new?" she asked mischievously.

"I am always ready for new experiences," he replied, "let it never be said that my mind is closed to anything."

Rosina ordered the maid to bring in something that Logan had never tasted, or even heard of, before. It was served in china cups like tea, and the fragrance was like nothing he had ever experienced before. It was smoky and aromatic with a hint of bitterness, and that was just how it tasted. He sipped it tentatively, wincing slightly at its astringency.

"Try a little milk," Rosina suggested, pouring some into his cup. "If you would like it sweeter still, you can put in some honey."

Logan sipped it again. It was glorious. The fragrant taste flowed smoothly over his tongue like a river of - he could not describe it. It was at once sweet and bitter, with a smoky, delicate aroma that was indescribably delicious.

"What is it?" he asked incredulously, "it is the most wonderful drink I ever tasted!"

Rosina sat back in her chair and laughed, clapping her hands.

"I knew you'd love it!" she cried. "It's coffee. They tell me that it is very fashionable in London and there are places called 'coffee houses' where rich gentlemen go to talk about politics and the events of the day. And -" she paused to gather her momentum and wagged a finger at him, "I foresee that one day coffee will be drunk all over the world!"

Hugh laughed.

"My daughter, the prophet!" he laughed, "just because she is besotted with it she thinks everyone else should be. She is like a missionary!"

"Where does it come from?" he asked, draining his cup.

"They say that it grows in Africa," she replied, pouring a cup for her father and herself, then another cup for herself, "and I think the Dutch bring it here. But I do not care whence it comes. I love it."

Logan and Hugh exchanged glances, and each man liked what he saw. Hugh saw a steady, honest man with few social skills, and Logan saw a caring, devoted father.

"I should like to get some," he said incredulously, "I have never tasted anything so - exotic."

"I think that you had better stop drinking after this cup, though," Rosina advised, "or you will not be able to sleep. I will get some for you, but it is expensive."

"I do not care what it costs!" Logan said amazed at himself. "But I am not sure I should dine here again." He looked at his empty coffee cup, "or I shall be fat and sleepless!"

"I doubt that, somehow," said Hugh, looking at the strapping figure of the man in front of him, and laughed. They all joined in, and Logan suddenly remembered the reason why he was there. Strangely, he had forgotten about it. He had actually enjoyed the food, the coffee, and the company, and it was all because of Rosina. He appreciated the fact that they had not tried to delve into his private life or ask him questions he could not answer, such as why, at the age of thirty, he was neither married nor courting anyone. He loved being with Rosina too, but he would never tell her so. They were already too close and he really was as he had told her, a lost cause.

Sweet Dreams and Nightmares

Maisie showed him to one of the guest rooms, which was luxuriously appointed with thick brocade curtains, Turkish rugs and a huge carved mahogany bed with a rich cream silk coverlet. He looked around in awe. Not even the best of his bedrooms looked like this.

"I do not think I have ever slept in a bed like this in my life!" he pushed down on the bed and felt its soft springiness under his fingers. All this luxury made his apartments look Spartan by comparison.

"I hope you sleep well, my Laird," she smiled at him, "is there anything else you need?"

"No, thank you," he turned to her, "I will be very comfortable here, Maisie."

She smiled and curtsied.

"Goodnight my Laird," she replied, "sleep well."

It was fully dark by now and becoming cold, so he took off his clothes, carefully folded them over a shining mahogany chair, and slipped in between the cool sheets, smiling. It was only then that the full weight of his problems descended on him. He might be a wanted man by now, or the itinerant laborer they called Big Sam could have been making it up for his own self-gratification, a moment of glory to lighten up the hard drudgery of his life. Or Donald, of whom Malcolm had spoken in tones of deep scorn, could have been making the whole thing up. But it was too close to the mark for that.

Someone had seen something. He sighed. Was it Rosina's coffee that was keeping him awake or the sense that he was standing inside a crumbling edifice which was going to fall on him at any moment? He

tossed and turned for a long, long time before sleep claimed him, but his dreams were no more pleasant than his conscious thoughts.

He dreamt that he was walking down a long corridor with many doors on each side. Rosina was running towards him, laughing, but when he put out his arms to receive her she ran straight past him and went through one of the doors behind him then shut it behind her. He tried to open it but it was firmly locked. He could hear her light

*M*usical laughter from inside the room and the deeper rumble of a man's voice. He tried the door again, and this time it opened. When he went inside he saw Rosina and Alasdair locked in a passionate embrace, but when they heard him they both turned towards him, and he saw that Alasdair's head was crushed inward with the ghastly wound that had killed him. He backed out hastily and ran as fast as he could out into empty darkness.

He woke up breathing heavily and looking around himself in a blind panic. He only stopped himself screaming by clamping his hand over his mouth. Eventually, he realized that it had been an ugly dream and let himself fall back on the pillows. After that, he couldn't sleep again.

Logan was not the only one dreaming about Rosina. Connor was doing the same, but his dreams were much more pleasant. He was dreaming about kissing her, caressing her face, shoulders, breasts, then laying her down on a soft bed while murmuring endearments to her. Best of all, she was whispering them back.

"My sweetheart, my darling, my love..." his voice was thick with desire, while hers was soft, but the words were the same. They were not only lovers but husband and wife. And she loved him with all her heart.

*C*onnor had had many such dreams about Rosina since his brother's death, but strangely he never dreamt of Alasdair at all. It was

as if he had never existed. He could not grieve for him, for he had not loved him the way brothers usually loved each other. He felt regretful about that, but he had spent not one moment of his busy days crying over Alasdair - he simply had not been worth it. Now he had his sights on Rosina, and he knew that he would treat her with the respect and love due to her. She was not only a beautiful woman, but she was intelligent, sometimes very funny, and full of life and joy. Connor would be proud to call her his wife, even if it took him years of courtship to achieve his goal of making her love him. He was thirty-eight years old and had had many chances to marry, but it was his intention to marry for love, to have children with a woman he cherished, and that woman, for him, could only be Rosina.

He looked in the mirror, and the man he saw looking back at him pleased him. He was straight and tall with regular features and deep brown eyes, His hair was thick, brown and wavy, and he was not balding like so many other men of his age. All in all, he thought, he was quite a handsome man, with wealth and comfort enough to offer any maid. Thinking of maids and maidenheads, he wondered if Rosina and Alasdair had consummated their marriage or if the killer had struck too soon for that to have happened. If he married her, he would find out, but it was not exactly a subject for conversation over the dinner table! He penned a letter to Rosina, asking her to come to dinner with him the following Sunday, and sent it with a messenger to Dumbarton Castle. He was sensitive enough, under the circumstances, to invite her father too. She would not want to be alone with another McPhail man for a long time yet.

Meanwhile, Malcolm was going in search of the man who had caused all the trouble. Big Sam was usually to be found shoeing horses at the blacksmith since he was one of the only men who could lift the feathered feet of the huge draught horses used for plowing and hauling. He was holding one up now while the blacksmith filed the

horny hoof of a magnificent gray Clydesdale stallion. Malcolm went up to his head and rubbed his hand against his velvety nose. Like most of his breed, he was a gentle giant, and he whickered softly at Malcolm's soft touch.

"*F*ine day," he said to Sam, taking his pipe out of his sporran.

"Aye," Sam grunted, putting the horse's foot down.

Malcolm was taking his time about lighting up his pipe, and the horse nudged him with his head as if telling him to get on with it.

"Fine beast," he said, laughing, "whit's his name?"

"Bobby," Sam answered, "he's ane o' Laird McPhail's horses, and a gentler animal ye couldnae' hope tae meet. Ye're a sweet boy, are ye no' Bobby? Did ye hear aboot the Laird's brother?"

"Aye," Malcolm shook his head and tutted, "terrible business. Did they get the skellum that did it?"

"Naw, not yet," he replied grimly "but they will. I saw who did it, though and I told the Justice who it wis. They need tae ask some mair questions then they're aff tae ask him some. Efter that it will jist be a matter o' time before they hang him - or worse. I wouldnae' like tae be in his shoes."

"Whit?" Malcolm pretended to be amazed, "tell me mair. Who wis it?"

Sam put the horse's foot down and wiped his hand on a rag.

"Yon big dour lump fae Castle Fraser," he answered, disgust evident in his face and voice. "It wis him."

"Naw!" Malcolm said in tones of deep incredulity, "could ye swear tae it?"

"Aye!" Sam picked up Bobby's front foot, grimacing with the effort, "he wis wearin' a stupid blue bunnet. I saw that."

Malcolm shook his head.

"Mind ye, naebody likes him onyway!" he observed. He was trying to keep on Sam's good side so he could pump him for more information.

"But if ye didnae' see his face - they wilnae' believe ye."

Sam shrugged. It was no longer his concern.

"I jist told them what I saw," he replied, "whit they dae wi' it's got naething tae dae wi' me."

"Ye're a good man, Sam," Malcolm smiled at him and patted him on the shoulder, "weel done for daein' yer duty."

Malcolm passed a few more moments of pleasant small talk with Sam so that he did not suspect that he was being interrogated, then he excused himself and left. As he walked away he looked back once to see Sam still holding the horse's foot. He had obviously not suspected a thing.

Acting the Part

When Rosina received Connor's invitation to dinner the first thing she did was show it to Maisie.

"Do you think I should go?" she asked anxiously.

Maisie looked at the letter, written in Connor's neat sloping hand.

"I don't think it is an unusual request," she remarked, "after all you are his sister-in-law, but I am not the best person to ask. Maybe you should speak to your father. He is invited too, after all."

Rosina nodded.

"You are right, as always, Maisie," she said warmly, smiling at her.

She sought out her father, and Laird Hugh looked at the invitation thoughtfully.

"I think we should go," he said, and looked up at her, "unless you really would rather not. I would understand your reluctance."

"It is not Connor's company I object to," she said sadly, "and I have never been into that castle, but I know that every brick of it will remind me of Alasdair." She mulled it over for a few moments longer.

"But it may be a way of cementing ties between our two families again," she said slowly, "I don't wish us to be enemies after what happened to Alasdair, so I think we will go."

Accordingly she sent a message back to Connor accepting the invitation. If she had seen his face when he received the news she would have been very glad to know that she had made a fellow human being so happy.

Malcolm rode speedily to his rendezvous with Logan and found him

sitting with his back resting against a tree, dozing. He shook his shoulder and Logan woke up suddenly, startled. When he saw Malcolm he yawned and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"Sorry, Malcolm," he said groggily, "I did not sleep well last night."

"Was the bed uncomfortable, sir? I cannot believe that!"

Logan shook his head.

"Nightmares, Malky," he said flatly, "bad ones. Do you have news for me?"

"First you must eat," he insisted, handing over a bag of oatcakes, cheese, apples, and a stoppered jar of milk.

"I have news," Malky went on, "he got a quick glimpse o' ye, but no' a really good look. It wis too dark. But he has made up his mind it wis you because o' the bunnet, and has said so tae the Justice. His men have questioned mony people already an' are coming tae question you an' a'. They sound very serious, my Laird, but they have very little tae go on."

Logan shook his head.

"Proof is not something they really need, Malky," he said sadly, "I am not well liked around here, as you know. Many people would be glad to see me gone."

"Because they dinnae' know ye like I dae, my Laird," Malcolm said fondly. Logan smiled at him, then frowned, thinking.

"I wish I knew what was in their minds," he said thoughtfully, "will they come and speak to me or will they imprison me? They may go to see Connor McPhail first, and I don't think he has any love for me either."

"Surely no', my Laird?" Malcolm laughed, "on the testimony of ane big eejit who caught a glimpse o' a man wi' a bunnet in the starlight? That's daft! How many men were at the weddin' wi' bunnets on? Twenty? D'ye think they will question jist you?"

Logan nodded.

"You're right," he said decisively, "and I do not want to be seen running away like a coward, Malky."

"And the Lady Rosina?" Malcolm asked, "could she have been seen outside her room?"

Logan shook his head emphatically.

"She had just - killed him when I went in, and Maisie was there not thirty seconds later. She was still standing in the same place - poor lass - she was an awful sight. I have never seen anyone so wretched."

They mounted their horses and went back to Castle Fraser at walking pace. It was threatening rain, but Fraser was too tired to care. Malcolm was busy with his own thoughts, so they made no noise apart from the sound of the horses' hooves on the hard-trodden earth. They were startled out of their wits, therefore, when two men on big powerful black horses emerged out of the trees and blocked their way. Both men were startled, but Logan, who had a lot of personal dignity and authority, due to his status as a Laird, bowed in the saddle and greeted them pleasantly enough.

"Good morning gentlemen," he said politely, "what can I do for you?"

"You can come with us, Laird Fraser," the bigger of the two men said. He was bald and barrel-chested, but he looked powerful, and Logan had no wish to cross him.

"Why?" He asked, frowning in apparent puzzlement.

"We are taking you to the Magistrate, where you will be questioned about the murder of Alasdair McPhail."

Suddenly Logan exploded into laughter, slapping his thigh and pointing at Malcolm.

"I told you this would happen, Davie, didn't I?" he swayed in the saddle, laughing so hard he almost fell off. Malcolm, who had joined in, immediately agreed with him.

"Aye, sir, ye did," he said, nodding at the two other men, who were sitting immobile, looking baffled. One of them, a skinny redhead, started to join in a little sheepishly. Presently Logan wiped his eyes and shook his head.

"Forgive me, gentlemen, but whenever Davie and I go out this happens at least once!" he paused to stifle another sob of laughter. When he went on in it was in a strangely altered mode of speech. "You see, I am Iain Stuart, Logan's cousin on his mother's side. Our fathers were identical twins, so we resemble each other to an uncanny degree, but I am only visiting him. I come from Fife, as you can no doubt hear by my accent. This is my manservant, Davie Lennox, and we have been out rabbit hunting, hence my very dirty clothes." He sighed, "unfortunately we had no luck today."

"*A*nd where is your cousin today?" the darker man asked, frowning.

"Probably out visiting one of his tenants," Logan said blithely, his Fife accent coming out very strongly now, "he is strangely devoted to them. Do you know that one of them called her baby after him? Anyway, if you wish we can take you to the castle, but I doubt you will find him there."

The two men conferred briefly for a moment, then the darker one, who seemed to be in charge, said:

"Naw, thank ye, Sir. I apologize for oor mistake," he nodded farewell and rode away at a trot with his companion. The minute they were out of earshot Logan slumped in his saddle and put his hand over his eyes. He was shaking, half with relief and half with mirth. Malcolm let out a hoot of laughter.

"*I* have never seen anything like it!" he said incredulously, "how did ye dae that? And yon accent!"

Logan smiled faintly.

"I have no idea," he replied grimly, "let us make haste, Malky. We must get to the castle and I must leave as quickly as I can. They are

stupid fellows, but they will soon realize they have been duped. How do you think they found us? Sam?"

"Naw, he is an honest man, I'd bet my life on it," he answered grimly, "but Donald, that wee nyaff. I'd put ma money on him."

Logan started to urge his horse into motion, but Malcolm put a hand on his arm, staying him for a moment.

"Do you not think it would be wiser to go somewhere else, sir?" he asked worriedly, "I can get what you need."

Logan thought for a moment.

"Aye, that is a better idea, Malky," he said, sighing, "I will go back towards Rosina's. You can meet me in the little abandoned cottage a little way away from the main gate."

Malcolm nodded, but before they went their separate ways he said:

"Sir, I have somethin' tae ask ye."

Logan raised his eyebrows enquiringly.

"Whereabouts in Fife dae ye come fae?"

"Dunfermline," Logan replied, without missing a beat.

"Is that where yer cousin comes fae?" Malcolm asked mischievously.

Logan grinned.

"I haven't got any cousins," he replied.

More Coffee

Logan had almost reached the end of the forest path when he saw the last person he had ever expected to see. Maisie was cantering towards him, looking more scared than he had ever seen her before. They were both equally shocked to see the other. Logan reined in, but Maisie beckoned him a little farther back inside the cover of the trees.

"Maisie - you look so frightened," he said urgently, "what is it?"

Maisie, who was normally so placid, bit back a sob. She looked over her shoulder to check if she was being followed, then breathed a sigh of relief as she saw no-one. When Logan looked closely at her he saw that her hands were shaking, and he covered them with his own. They were freezing. He dismounted from the horse and helped her down too, then put his arms around her to comfort her. Even though there was no chemistry between them, it felt good to hold a woman in his arms again. Eventually she stopped trembling and he let her go.

"Tell me why you are so upset," he asked gently.

"Two men came to the castle today, to ask the Mistress if she had heard anything," she said shakily, "and they asked if we knew where you were. They assumed we had not heard that you were a suspect. The guards told them they had not seen you but they said they wanted to arrest you. I was coming to warn you."

"You could have been in danger," he pointed out, "anything could have happened to you."

Maisie smiled grimly.

"The guards pointed in a different direction to the one I was going to take and anyway," she drew aside the folds of her riding habit to reveal a short sword in a leather scabbard, "I know how to use it."

He laughed in amazement and took his hands away, then grew serious.

"These men," he asked, frowning, "were they riding black horses, and was one dark and the other a redhead?"

"Yes," she replied, "how did you know?"

"Because we met them!" he grimaced, "they must have looped around and come back this way."

"And you met them? How did you get away?"

He shrugged.

"I pretended to be my cousin. Malcolm pretended to be my servant."

"You have saved me a journey, my Laird," she said gratefully, "thank you."

"I need to speak to Lady Rosina," he said urgently, "is she at home?"

"Yes, and she will see you. She is very worried about you."

They rode back to the castle and were welcomed at the gate by a very relieved Rosina. It was beginning to rain and they went inside just as the first drops began to fall. Rosina led them into one of the guest bedrooms that had the best view of the gatehouse.

Rosina looked out of the window then turned to Logan, taking his hands.

"Logan, this is all my fault!" she cried desperately, "I cannot let you take the blame for it! They came to ask if I had heard anything else that might help them to find you. They probably think I am on their side."

He shook his head.

"I was guilty too," he replied, "I hid the body. That is a serious offense," he turned away from her, "Rosie, there is a lot about me you don't know. Sometimes I think I would welcome death." His voice was

heavy with despair.

"*Why* would you say that?" she asked, mystified. "it makes no sense. You have everything you need - a home, land, enough food, wealth - why would you want to end your life?"

He looked at her and once more she was pinned to the spot by his intense, dazzling blue gaze.

"Oh, it's nothing," he waved away what he had just said, "I'm feeling sorry for myself. I slept badly."

"*Ha!*" Rosina clapped her hands, giggling, "I told you not to have that second cup of coffee!"

"You did," he smiled at her, "and I didn't listen."

"Would you like some more to wake you up?"

He pretended to consider for a moment.

"If you will join me," he replied.

She ordered the coffee and the three of them sat in a peaceful silence till it came. Maisie was smocking a dress and Rosina was knitting, a craft she had just recently learned from Maisie. Logan thought how contented he was at that very moment, saying nothing, doing nothing. He could have sat there forever in quiet lassitude, but he had things to do and things to say. Being with these two beautiful women was like an oasis of happiness in the barren desert of his life. He knew he was wallowing in self-pity but it felt good in a perverse kind of way.

*H*e smelled the coffee before he saw it, and his mouth watered, Rosina had ordered some delicate pastries too and he had to restrain himself from falling on them and swallowing them whole. When the dainty meal was finished, Logan outlined his plan for fleeing to his Highland property.

"I will have to go by night," he said, "with all the possessions I can carry. Malky is coming with them now, and I hope he is not being watched, but he is a clever fellow."

"But your Highland property is the first place they will look for you," Maisie pointed out.

"Aye, but they will be a day or two behind me," he replied, "and I have many friends there, believe it or not."

"I have a better idea," Rosina said impulsively, "stay at our place! It is not large, but I get the feeling that you are not a person who needs all the trappings of luxury?"

"I am not," he smiled, "and I will gladly accept your offer - Rosie. Where is your house?"

"*F*ort William - a fair distance," she answered, "so I doubt if you will be found there. And while you are away I am going to find out who started this. I will write directions for you."

She quickly got a pen from the writing table and scribbled down the address and a short letter of introduction, then blotted it and gave it to him.

"I have to go," he said urgently, "Malky will be waiting for me."

Maisie took the coffee tray out of the room and in that moment Rosina reached up to draw Logan's head down to her own and kissed him. There was a frozen moment of surprise when she thought he was going to pull away, then he opened his mouth and began to move his lips on hers softly and sensually. His arms crept around her, gently at first, then tightly, so that their bodies were pressed together with no space between them. He was warm, hard and solid and she heard and felt his breathing deepen as he crushed her against him. Eventually he tore his mouth away from her.

"*R*osie - we can't -" he began, but she put her fingertips to his lips, looking up into the blue of his eyes that were at once warm and cold.

"NEVER," she said emphatically, "never tell me anything about lost causes ever again!"

Logan was so stunned by what had just happened that he was still staring at Rosina when Maisie came in. She took in the situation in a fraction of a second, averted her eyes and curtsied.

"Anything else you need, Mistress?" she asked politely. Rosina shook her head, Maisie closed the door then Logan pulled her into his arms again and kissed her as if his life depended on it. This was just for today, he promised himself. After today he would never touch her again, and he would live on the memory of it forever. He had to go. He had to hurry. His lips moved from her mouth to her neck, from her face to her breast till he became scared that he would not be able to contain himself any longer, but she pulled away gently.

"Now, Logan Fraser, if you were a lost cause I think you just found yourself again," her eyes were twinkling as she looked up at him. He was shaking his head in disbelief, then his face grew solemn again.

"Rosie - this is just for today. It must not happen again."

"Why not?"

"I have to go - goodbye, Rosina!" He ran, not looking back. A moment later she saw him riding away towards the old cottage, where she recognized the figure of Malcolm coming out to meet him. They hugged each other, then Logan rode away. In a moment he was gone from sight, but Rosina could still feel the pressure of his lips for hours afterward.

Dinner with Connor

Rosina was dreading eating at Connor's house. She felt awkward and guilty as her father escorted her into his sumptuously furnished dining room. If only Connor knew - if only either of them knew, she would not be sitting here now, she was sure. Connor served the wine and they chatted inconsequentially for a while before he asked the question she had been dreading.

"How are you feeling, Rosina?" he asked, calm as ever, "are you recovering?"

"Every day gets a little better, Connor," she replied with an attempt at a bright smile, "And you?"

Connor frowned, then sighed.

"To be truthful, I don't know how I feel," he replied, "as you know, Alasdair and I had not had a good relationship for a long time, but he was still my brother, and I loved him." He was concentrating very hard on his food and avoiding Rosina's eyes, but when he looked up his gaze was one of anger. "Would it surprise you to know that I hated him too?"

"No," Rosina replied, shrugging, "I think we all feel like that sometimes, Connor. I loved him too, but I will admit that sometimes he drove me mad!" she laughed, but she was aching inside. She imagined that the two men at the table were looking at her and seeing 'I killed him' stamped on her forehead. She wished with all her heart that she had never seen nor heard of Alasdair McPhail. He had been a blight on everyone's life.

"No, Rosina, you don't understand," he said bitterly, "when I say 'I hated him,' I mean it from the bottom of my heart. I detested, loathed

and despised what he had become in recent years, although my boyhood self still loved him, and I am glad that he did not show that side of himself to you. Or did he?"

"To me, he was always gentle and kind," she said tenderly, "and I had no reason to believe otherwise. I cannot believe he was taken away from me so cruelly."

"*You* were fortunate," he said, "very fortunate, Rosina. He was obliged to marry his first wife - she was carrying his child - but she suffered at his hands, as many women have suffered since. He was a brutal man. But he seemed to love you and I thought this time it would be different."

Rosina frowned, apparently in puzzlement, but her heart was beating nineteen to the dozen. Connor took a sip of his whiskey and began to eat again. During the whole disturbing conversation, he had not raised his voice once.

"*He* was one of the reasons I never married," he went on, "because I was not sure if I could keep any wife of mine safe."

"Then why did you not warn me, Connor?" she asked angrily. Her father put a warning hand on her arm but she shook it off. "If you thought that he might seriously hurt me, why did you not tell me? What if he had killed me?"

"Yes," Hugh added angrily, "Rosina could have been injured - or worse!"

Connor said nothing for a few moments. When at last he did speak, it was as if the words were being dragged out of him. But he could not say 'because I thought you might think I was being jealous. Because I love you.'

"Because I am a coward," he admitted, "I looked at your invitation to the wedding and I refused. I thought that would be the end of it, then when your letters kept coming I thought you must be planning some kind of reconciliation for us at the wedding. I didn't know what

Alasdair would do. he was so unpredictable, and I did not want to be there in case he was violent."

"But a letter, surely? Even a note?" Rosina went on insistently, "he would never have known!"

"As I said, Rosina, I was a coward, and I put the whole matter into a little cupboard in the back of my mind to forget about it, which I did. I told myself I did not want to become involved, and that it was your business. Likely, knowing your relationship, you would not believe me anyway, but think I was trying to ruin your relationship. But I should have tried - it would have cost me so little effort." He took a deep breath, "I am sorrier than I can say - did he hurt you at all?"

"No - he did not, but he could have done." She glared at him ferociously then looked at Hugh, "take me home, Father. Let us leave this wretch to himself. Thank you for the food, Laird McPhail. It was delicious, and my compliments to your chef, but we will not be dining here again. Goodnight."

She strode out, but Connor followed her.

"Rosina - please forgive me," he pleaded, clasping his hands together and holding them in front of himself as if in prayer, "please - I will do anything to make it up to you!"

Hugh put his arm in front of Rosina and swept Connor aside

"Listen to my daughter. She wants nothing more to do with you." he said disgustedly, "good evening."

Hugh gave Connor a hefty shove and he staggered backward.

In the carriage on the way home, Hugh put his arm around Rosina.

"I am beginning to think that whoever killed your husband may have done you a favor, Rosie," he said heavily.

"Don't say that, Father!" She was crying now, a little because of grief for the happiness which had been a fantasy, but also because of

shame, guilt, and something which she had just realized. The man she truly loved had ridden out of the castle without her.

The man Rosina truly loved was sitting by a campfire he had lit beside the road to Fort William. He had made sure that he was well concealed and had good grazing for his horse, and he was plentifully supplied with food and blankets. It was not yet September, but already the evenings were becoming longer, the days shorter, and an early winter chill was in the air.

Logan made himself a meal of bread, cheese, oatcakes, and apples. He was saving his dried fruit and salted meat for further on in the journey. He did not know the road to Fort William as well as the one to Inverness, and for all, he knew there were no little villages on the road at all where he could resupply himself. As he lay down to sleep he was thinking about Rosina. He had been steadfastly forcing her to the back of his mind all along the road, trying to focus on how he could make right the situation in which he found himself, but now in the drowsy moments before sleep, those kisses came back to him. He could taste the coffee on her lips and feel their sweet pressure against his. Their tongues had touched briefly, and he had begun to feel an arousal that he had not felt for many years. But he did not love her. He hardly knew her, for God's sake! And love was not for him because it had burned him once before and once was enough.

No, he did not, would not, could not love her just because she was beautiful and had been so helpless she needed a champion. Look at where it had got him! He would not even let her own up. Was that because he wanted to be a hero in her eyes? Was that worth dying for? Probably not, but somehow he just could not let her do it. He was a foolish, arrogant, prideful man, who would likely go to the gallows for the sake of a woman. But then, would she let him do that, or had the whole exercise been a total waste of time and effort? He groaned. This was getting him nowhere. He fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion after another half-an-hour of tossing and turning, and the only creatures who saw him were the owls and the deer.

Connor's Proposition

Connor spent the whole of the day after the disastrous dinner party in bed. All in all he slept for nineteen hours. It was his body's way of handling stress. Some people were unable to rest at all, but Connor was not one of them. He slept, and slept, and slept. When he woke up he felt a little better till the events of the night before came crowding into his mind. He was not one of those people who analyzed things till the whole process made him sick, however, and he quickly resolved to remedy the situation. He knew that no amount of pleading or prostrating himself at her feet would soften Rosina - she despised weakness - so he would work on her father, man to man. Accordingly he made an appointment with Hugh, arguing that it was not right that close neighbors like them should be at loggerheads since it would affect the productivity of both their lands.

When Hugh Buchanan saw the letter he was tempted to tear it up, but when he had given it some thought he decided that there was some sense in what Connor said, so he invited him over for a glass of whiskey one night when Rosina was visiting a lady friend. Connor was pleased, though nervous, and he dressed carefully for the occasion in semi-formal attire. He was shown into Hugh's private apartments and not his dining room, which he took to be a good sign. Connor bowed formally and shook Hugh's hand.

"Good evening, my Laird - do I find you well?" he asked formally, smiling.

"Thank you, Laird, you find me very well - and you?" He raised his eyebrows but otherwise his face was expressionless.

"Fine, thank you, Sir, but for one thing - of course you know to what I refer?"

"I do," Hugh said cautiously, "but we cannot undo the past, Sir. You cannot warn Rosie now."

"No, Connor sighed," but I wanted her to at least be able to tolerate me till she can find it in her heart to forgive me. I know she has no reason to love my family, but, Sir Hugh - I am not my brother. And, thank the Lord, she was not molested in any way - wait -" he held up

*h*is hand as Hugh began to protest, "would anything I said have stopped the marriage?"

"I do not know," Hugh replied, "Rosina has always been a headstrong girl, but she is not foolhardy. She would probably have considered it carefully and given him a chance to explain himself. She would have asked for my opinion, and between us, we would have come to some sort of solution or compromise. She may still have married him, whatever I said, but forewarned is forearmed."

*H*ugh was pouring out two generous measures of whiskey as he spoke and he pushed a plate of butter shortbread towards Connor.

"*To* soak up the whiskey," he smiled slightly, and Connor took it as another good sign. "My cook is my treasure," he went on, "she is an artist and has been with us since Rosie was a baby. Laird Fraser was here a wee while ago for dinner and he said he had never tasted anything so delicious as her roast lamb."

*C*onnor raised his eyebrows.

"You managed to prise him out of his castle then?" he asked, surprised.

"Aye, Rosie invited him," Hugh replied, "he is not such a bad fellow when you get to know him. He is shy, I think. He does not speak or smile unless there is anything to speak or smile about, but what he says is worth hearing. Rosie likes him."

"You know he is suspected of the murder of my brother?"

"Aye!" Hugh took a sip of his whiskey and looked Connor straight in the eye. "And I do not believe a word of it!"

Connor nodded slowly.

"You must do what is in your heart. I did not come here to quarrel, but to make amends," his tone was conciliatory, and Hugh relaxed, "we cannot listen to every rumor!"

They were quiet for a moment, each thinking his own thoughts.

"Rosina has two things to forgive me for," he said, at last, gazing into the fire, "one for the lack of warning, and the other for being a McPhail. If she ever does forgive me for both those things, do you -"

He took a deep breath, "do you think she would let me court her? If she has no-one else in mind? And would you object? I would lay all my affairs open for your scrutiny and you could ask every person in my acquaintance about my character. "

Hugh was stunned. He took a great gulp of his whiskey and looked at Connor in astonishment.

"I have no idea," he replied, "as I said, she is stubborn. I tried to marry her to the Laird of Mhor when she was sixteen, and she rebelled so strongly that I had to call it off. She said he was too old."

"How old was he?" Connor asked curiously.

"Twenty-eight!" Hugh replied, laughing, "then he was too fat - that was true - then he was going bald. He was a man of means and had a

very kindly disposition, but Rosie said she had means and she wasn't marrying anyone so ugly."

They laughed, and Connor suddenly felt happier. If Rosina would not have him then so be it. There was no helping it, but at least he seemed to have snapped out of the depression he had been in since his brother's death.

Presently Connor took out his pocket watch.

"I had better go, or Lady Rosina will discover that I have been here," he said regretfully, "thank you, Sir. It has been a very pleasant evening. But I meant what I said. I am most abjectly sorry for my cowardice and if I would do anything if I could make it up to Lady Rosina."

Neither of them had heard the door opening quietly behind them.

"I fear it is too late, Laird Connor," Rosina said angrily, "for Rosina has already discovered it!"

Connor saw red. He was tired of abasing himself, but being the man he was, he did not raise his voice but said what he had to say in his calm, measured manner.

"*Then* so be it, My Lady Rosina," he replied, bowing, "is it, Buchanan or McPhail?"

"*Happily* it is still Buchanan," she replied haughtily.

"As you wish," he said calmly, "I have apologized over and over again, and I had hoped to mend fences once and for all, but it seems that you are determined to bear a grudge. I have some dignity left, so I will not say sorry again. Have it your own way, lady. You will not see me again unless you wish to, which is a pity because I think we could have been good friends. Goodnight."

*H*e turned and left.

Hugh Buchanan looked at his daughter for a full minute as she moved restlessly about the room, trying to calm down. Eventually, he drained his glass and put it down on the table with a thud. His blue eyes were like chips of ice.

"*I* never thought I would ever say this to you, my daughter, but I am ashamed of you. Goodnight."

Maisie was undressing Rosina, who was uncharacteristically quiet when she began to tell her about the episode with Connor. As she listened, Maisie formed her own opinion and knew that it would not be what Maisie wanted to hear. She let her mistress go on with her monologue, however, then, when Maisie had laced up her nightdress, Rosina asked her what she thought. Maisie considered a moment as she picked up Rosina's tortoiseshell hairbrush. As she began to draw it down her hair with sure, slow strokes, she frowned at her mistress in the mirror.

"*T*ruly, Mistress, I think you were very harsh," she said sadly, "Laird Connor is not his brother and he has tried in every way he can to say how sorry he is for his mistake. I think he is a good man, and if you are going to be angry with anyone, then be angry with me. I also doubted Alasdair from the first time I saw him."

Rosina looked at her, stunned.

"Am I the only one who never saw the truth?" she asked incredulously.

"No, Mistress," she replied, shaking her head, "your father had no idea either. Neither did any of the staff."

"But why did you not tell me of your suspicions?" Rosina asked angrily.

"Because they were **ONLY** superstitions, Mistress. There was no evidence. It was just a feeling, and you would have been furious!" she

Carried on with her brushing for a moment, "am I dismissed from your service now?" she looked up fearfully and met Rosina's eyes in the mirror. Rosina laughed softly.

"No dear Maisie, for I could not live without you!" She leaned her head backward on Maisie's body, "who else would endure my moods, my outbursts, and my stubbornness?"

Maisie laughed,

"That is true, Mistress!"

"Is there no young man who catches your eye?" Rosina asked, "because a lovely dark mysterious lady like yourself should have many admirers! Even Lairds!"

Maisie shook her head, blushing.

"Marriage is the last thing on my mind, Mistress," she replied, "I have a comfortable place to stay, enough to eat, and a considerate employer who treats me well and pays me generously. Why do I need a husband?"

"Maybe you will want children one day."

Maisie shrugged.

"I would like to have them, but I think if I live the remainder of my days without them I will still die happy!" she began to expertly plait Rosina's hair as she spoke.

"I wish we were sisters," Rosina said wistfully. Maisie smiled.

"I wish so too, Mistress," she got to the end of the plait and tied a silk ribbon around it, then went to turn down her bed.

"What should I do about Connor, Maisie?" Rosina asked.

"Let it settle awhile, mistress," Maisie advised "when you see each other again he will have cooled off a little, I suspect, and you can say what you want to say. But grudges are not a good idea. They eat away your soul, and they are very heavy to carry, Mistress."

"You are right, Maisie," she sighed, but then you are nearly always right!"

Maisie helped Rosina to bed and bade her goodnight, leaving her, hopefully, to sleep, but Rosina had a lot to think about.

Fort William

When Logan arrived in Fort William two days later he liked it immediately. It was at the western end of the Caledonian Canal, part of the Highland Boundary Fault, the great fissure that separates the north of Scotland from the south. Fort Augustus, where he had lived as a child and young man, stood on the north eastern shore of Loch Ness, where a monster reputedly lived. Fort William, even though it had been named after an English king and built to control the unruly Cameron clan, was clean and prosperous. It stood on the banks of Loch Linnhe where it emptied into the sea, and Logan loved the sea. Even though it had been besieged by Jacobite forces for a while and there was still a military garrison full of English soldiers there he felt safe, but he couldn't wait to rest his head in a comfortable bed in Rosina's house. He stood for a while looking at the gray waters of the loch, breathing in great lungfuls of fresh air, then he went to find what he hoped would be his sanctuary.

Rosina had had no time to give him a description of the house, which was very new, probably not more than ten years old, he thought as he looked at it. It had the same forbidding grey walls as most of the houses and its sturdy roof was tiled in slate. There was a shiny black front door which had a huge brass knocker in the shape of a roaring lion with inch-long fangs.

Logan knew that there was a housekeeper who lived in the house permanently, and he had his letter of introduction, but he was still very nervous as he rattled the brass knocker against the door. When it opened, a tall, handsome gray-haired woman stood there looking at him questioningly. She must have been in her fifties, he thought,

though she had the trim figure of a much younger woman. The green eyes inspecting him had the suggestion of a twinkle in them, although her expression was stern.

"*A*nd who might you be?" she asked haughtily. Logan bowed.

"I am Logan Fraser," he announced, "and do I have the pleasure of addressing Mistress McNab?"

"Aye," she replied suspiciously, looking him up and down.

"A letter of introduction from my friend the Lady Rosina Buchanan." He presented the letter and she read it. At once her expression changed and her whole face broke into a beaming smile.

"Oh, my wee Rosina!" she put her hand to her chest and shook her head, smiling all the while. "How is she? Is she well? Is she still as bonnie as ever? I havena' seen her for nigh on two years! Come in, sir, and take the weight aff yer feet." She ushered him into the house and relieved him of his top coat.

"Now, what can I get ye tae drink?" she asked, looking as though her only wish in life was to serve him, "I have milk, ale, whiskey - after yer journey ye might want a bit o' the hard stuff - or tea."

"Tea, please," he smiled at her, "I'll leave the hard stuff for another time!"

"As you wish, Sir," she smiled and bustled off to do his bidding, then he had time to look around and take stock. The house, though sizeable, was not huge, but it was beautifully decorated and furnished. The walls were all of fine-grained oak, shining like satin, the furniture made of the same wood, beautifully carved and polished. The curtains, like the ones in Rosina's own house, were made of thick crimson brocade, and all the furniture was upholstered with the same fabric. There were Turkish rugs on the floor in bright jewel colors and paintings, mostly landscapes glowed on the walls. The ceilings were richly carved with stylized flowers and Corinthian columns upheld the roof.

He could see that much taste and effort had gone into the decor of the

room and wondered if Rosina had done it -

it was too delicately handled to have been done by a man. He went to look out of the big bay window and noticed that the top part of it was inlaid with stained glass in the same hues as the carpets. Everything reflected the colors of everything else, and it was a truly harmonious effect. Logan loved it, and wished whoever had done it could come and decorate his Spartan masculine, apartments.

Presently Mrs. McNab came back with a tea tray on which rested the teapot, cup, a milk jug and a plate with a heap of scones dripping with butter and honey. Logan hadn't been aware of being hungry but now that he had seen the scones he was ravenous.

"*We*ll have a wee bit dinner in a while," she explained, "but ye're a big lump o' a lad - I think ye need a bit o' somethin' else till then."

He bit into one and she watched his rapturous expression as he chewed and swallowed.

"Did you bake these, Mrs. McNab?" he asked incredulously. She smiled again.

"*Aye*," she answered proudly, "I'm away' tae get the washin' in. I'll be back in a wee minute."

"*They* are the best scones I ever tasted!" he went on to eat another, and another, and another, and when he had finished the last one, she came back and looked at his plate, which had nothing left on it but a few crumbs.

"*Ye*ll never eat yer dinner!" she looked at him and burst out laughing again.

"Mrs. McNab, you have never seen me REALLY eat!" he informed her, standing up to his full impressive height.

She shook her head.

"How does yer wife keep up wi' ye?" she asked, "you must eat her oot o' house an' hame!"

At once, his face clouded over.

"I'm not married, Mrs. McNab," he said heavily, "would you mind showing me to my room, please? And would you mind drawing me a bath?"

"Aye, of course, Sir," she went before him upstairs and led him down a narrow corridor to a room right at the end.

He looked at the enormous space, full of light and sunshine, and knew that he loved this house. The four-poster bed had a canopy of deep yellow silk, and the curtains were made of cream brocade, but the furniture was dark mahogany. There was a long oval mirror at one end of the room which was tilted at just the right angle to reflect the sky outside and make the room look even bigger. The contrast of light and dark was stunning, and he sat, staring into space for a while, enjoying the sound of seagulls and the waves lapping on the shore outside. Then he did something that he very seldom did, and looked in the mirror, tilting it so that he could see his face. It looked back at him without expression, and he tried to see it as a stranger would when meeting him for the first time. He ran his hands backward through his thick mop of hair that was as dark as a starlit sky. His eyes were deep set under thick black eyebrows, and almost impossibly blue. Even he had to admit that he had never seen eyes the same color as his own. He had a full mouth, high cheekbones, a squarish jawline and a long nose with slightly flaring nostrils. It was a handsome enough face, he supposed. His gaze wandered down to his prominent Adam's apple, probably the reason why he had such a deep voice, and his strong, broad shoulders. He was almost half a head taller than any other man he knew, and he was sturdy too. He knew that many women liked that, but few would brave his taciturn exterior to get to the gentle man inside because he would never allow it. But Rosina -

Rosina was the one woman who had breached his defenses, but he could do nothing about it. This big, strong handsome man would stay barren for all his life. He would have no-one to whom he could bequeath the castle and lands, and no-one to pass on the family name, although there was no shortage of Frasers!

*H*is bath was brought to his room by a huge man. He was not as tall as Logan, but he was at once fat and muscular and seemed to have enormous strength. Logan could see that he was slightly retarded, but he was good-natured, smiled a lot but said little.

"*M*y godson, Alec," Mrs. McNab said as she brought in the water, "he's a wee bit touched, but he's a good boy. He daes the garden, and we hae Callum tae dae the odd jobs." She finished pouring the last of the water. "Is there onything else ye need?"

"*J*ust one thing, Mrs McNab," he replied. "I really need you to call me Logan!"

She put her head on one side and smiled.

"Aye, I think I can dae that! An' you can call me Annie."

"Thank you kindly, Annie," he said as she closed the door.

He got into the hot water and scrubbed himself thoroughly, washed his hair and lay back to rest his eyes for a while. Two hours later when he woke up the bath water was freezing and so was he, but he felt rested and clean, inside and out. It was a good feeling.

Annie

Logan got up and threw his clothes on, then rushed downstairs.

"Annie!" he shouted as he went into the kitchen. She was standing by the coal stove stirring a pot of something meaty that smelled delicious. "I'm so sorry - you should have woken me!"

"Nae harm done, Logan," she answered, "I got Alec tae go in an' have a look at ye. He said ye were sleepin' so I decided just tae let ye since ye looked as if ye needed it. I knew ye'd wake up when the water got cauld."

She carried on stirring the delicious mixture for a moment, tasted it and nodded.

"Are ye hungry, Logan?" She asked mischievously.

"I am about to eat the table leg, Annie!"

She threw back her head and laughed, and in a moment Logan found out that Annie's expertise was not confined to scones. Her beef stew was almost as delicious the one he had had at Rosina's, and when he had finished he sat back, replete, and smiled at her tentatively.

"Ye dinnae' smile very often, dae ye, Logan?" she asked, looking at him thoughtfully.

"Most people say that," he said reflectively, and shrugged. "I suppose everyone has his own way of expressing himself, Annie."

"Ye're troubled," she frowned at him, "I have the Sight. I got it from my Mither, and she from hers."

"Hmmm..." he looked down at his hands and avoided her eyes, "I have my doubts about the Sight, Annie."

"You are a Laird," she said firmly. He looked up quickly.

"How did you know that?" he asked incredulously, his eyes searching her face. She laughed softly and put her hand on his.

"Nae magic there, my Laird," she answered, "yer voice. It is far too high class for the likes of us poor fishin' folk!"

"*I* must ask you not to tell anyone," Logan pleaded, "I came here to rest."

"Naw, my Laird," Annie replied, picking up his hand and stroking it, "ye came here for sanctuary."

"How -?" he began, but she held up her hand for silence.

"I telt ye how I knew," she replied, looking deeply into his eyes, "ye're runnin' away fae somethin' - in fact - twa' things."

He frowned, puzzled, then stood up, intending to put some distance between them. Maybe someone had followed him here and she had spoken to them.

"You don't know me from Adam," he said coldly, "and though you are a lovely woman and I do not wish to offend you, I must ask you to please attend to your own affairs and stay out of mine."

"Jist ane mair thing," she added before he left the room, "fae ane o' these things ye'll escape - from the other ye willnae'."

*H*e looked around to see her penetrating green eyes almost boring holes in him.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean jist that. But I cannae' tell ye which o' these things will find ye and which will not, and whether they are good or bad."

"I think you need only look at my face to see that something is troubling me, Annie. As for the second thing - you are imagining it."

Annie continued to gaze at him for a while longer, then she nodded and smiled.

"We will see," she said calmly, "now, Logan, will ye take a wee bit whiskey?"

"No, thank you," he replied, trying not to sound annoyed, "I don't like it much. I am going for a short walk then I will be back to go to bed."

"I will turn the sheets down," she replied.

Logan was never happier than when he was outside in the elements. He walked along the shore of the loch, enjoying the wind in his hair and his face. He could see a squall coming in by the great mass of purple-gray clouds along the skyline, and presently the wind picked up. He ran back to the house and burst through the front door, breathless. Annie and a man he had not yet met were sitting beside the fire, he with whiskey in his hands and she with ale. The man had sparse dark hair and was very thin, but he looked wiry and strong as a steel wire. He seemed around the same age as Annie and Logan liked him instinctively.

"*This* is Callum," Annie introduced him and the two men shook hands, "he works for us mendin' an' paintin'an' a' the rest o' the clever things men dae."

"An' a' the while I'm courtin' young Mrs McNab here," he smiled a crooked-toothed smile and his gaze when it fell on her was tender and full of love. It made him look twenty years younger.

"Aye, and come November we will be wed, an' it cannae' come soon enough, for my bed is awfy cauld at night!" Annie's peal of laughter was joyous and Logan could no help but join in.

"Are you married, Logan?"

"I am not, and have no wish to be," Lachlan replied grimly. Annie quickly changed the subject.

"So whit are ye daein while ye're here?" she asked.

"Going fishing tomorrow, going for a walk around - I don't know -

whatever I feel like," he gave them both a curt nod, "good evening, and it was nice to meet you both."

Annie and Callum sat silent for a moment. Annie looked troubled as she picked up her sewing, and Callum asked her gently:

"Somethin's wrang, lass, whit is it?"

Annie shook her head.

"He is runnin' away, Dear, but soon he will find that there is naewhere tae hide, at least for ane o' them. He's a troubled young man." She paused to break off a thread. "He gets a' strange when ye mention love or marriage. He's had his heart broke in a thousand pieces and it willnae' mend till another lass comes and daes it for him."

Callum lit his pipe and stared thoughtfully into the fire.

"Some men are jist like that, hen," he answered, sighing. "They can only gie' their heart ance. He's a big strong lad bit he's jist a wee boy inside and he wants a nice girl tae come and kiss him better." Annie had been about to mention that Logan was a laird but she kept her own counsel because he had asked her to.

"No' too many o' them roon' here!" Annie laughed.

"No indeed!"

"I must go, lass," he said reluctantly as he stood up, wincing.

"Is yer knee painin' ye again?" she asked. Callum had had painful arthritis for ten years, often brought on by bad weather.

"Aye," Callum said irritably, "when it's as bad as this ye know there's gaun' tae be a big beast o' a storm in a wee while!"

"Aye," she kissed his cheek and they embraced quickly. "Ye'd better hurry, Sweetheart."

She saw him out of the door and yawned. She knew she had to go to bed but she was too restless. she kept thinking of the strange man upstairs, and the nagging feeling she had that something or someone was coming to find him. Her 'sight' had never been wrong, and she

had no fear of her insights or doubts about their accuracy. She could never see things with total clarity, and with Logan, she could see a shadow, but she could also see a brilliant light.

Setting Off

Rosina got on with her life. Taking Maisie's advice, she put all her problems with Connor to the back of her mind and just tried the best she could to get on with her days. She did the usual things young ladies of a certain status did: went shopping in Dumbarton and occasionally even Glasgow where she and Maisie went to a hotel and enjoyed a romantic play at a local theatre. She went to play cards and had picnics with friends, but suddenly all the diverting pastimes she had enjoyed before seemed boring and stale. At last, she had to admit it - she was pining for Logan. He was the first person she thought of in the morning and the last face she saw at night. She prayed for him, worried about him and kept thinking of every possible thing that could harm him while he was away from her.

Meanwhile, she had tried to find out anything that could lead her to the true source of the rumors about Logan. Malcolm had seemed convinced by Sam but he had also admitted that it was very dark and there was chaos in the courtyard. Most of the men had drunk a lot of whiskey and ale that night too, and their word could not be relied on. No, Rosina had a feeling that there was more to it than the half-seen image of a blue hat in the dark. Someone was behind the spreading of the rumors about Logan, and it had to be someone of consequence. She dismissed Connor straight away. It would have been far too obvious and he had no motive. He only wanted to find out who had killed his brother - there was no advantage for him in implicating an innocent man, and there was no enmity between them.

No, this was someone with a grudge, and Rosina meant to find out who it was. She had tried as best she could, using her privileged status

as an heiress to gain entrance to the most prestigious people in the district to find out if there was any information to be had, but there was none. She enlisted Malcolm's help as often as he could spare the time to engage the grooms and kitchen staff if they had heard anything. However, in spite of the fact that kitchen grapevine was usually very accurate and moved with almost lightning speed, he could find nothing.

Rosina felt frustrated and useless. She had been putting off going to see Logan because she wanted to leave no stone unturned in her quest to find out the truth, but eventually, she decided that there was no more to be gained from staying at home and wasting her time. More and more she wished she had owned up and taken her chances. She was burdened with a massive load of guilt and sometimes, during the smallest hours of the night she would wake from a nightmare in a cold sweat and cry softly into her pillow. She would dream of Alasdair's rotting corpse coming into her bed, or his soul in the shape of a big, black, hideous fanged hound. They were always black, and they were always carrying a blood-crusted candlestick. Sometimes Maisie would hear her and come to sleep with her, rocking her to sleep as if she were a child. There was no-one to share the secret with except Malcolm and all he could do was offer a few clumsy words of comfort and the hope that everything would be all right.

Maisie, in her usual practical manner, began to organize.

They had decided to ride on their own horses, making the trip slowly and taking what shelter they could along the way. They were both experienced riders and Malcolm was to accompany them, but they would not be able to dress like the ladies they so obviously were.

They could have adopted the costume of rustic Scottish women, but Rosina, with her robust and well-developed sense of adventure, decided to put on the garb of a stable boy, which meant hose and a

tunic, the same as Malcolm. It was much more practical and comfortable than the thick layers of petticoats even the country women wore, and Rosina felt liberated. When she said goodbye to her father, however, he looked anxious and fearful, and she felt a pang of guilt over and above the continual guilt she carried around with her.

"Don't worry, Father," she said soothingly, "there are three of us. Malcolm and Maisie are both experienced with their swords and none of us will take any chances with strangers."

"I am your father," Hugh said worriedly, "I would not be much of a father if I did not worry, Rosie! Please be as careful as you can and get a message to me if you can to let me know you are safe."

He wrapped his arms around her and whispered into hair: "you are the most precious person in my world. I love you more than life itself. If anything happened to you I would wish for death myself," he took a deep breath, "I do understand why you need a change of air, but I wish you could have waited till I could go with you."

"Then I would never go, Father," she answered, kissing his cheeks, "because there is something else you love as much as me."

"What?" his brow furrowed. "What can I possibly love as much as my daughter?"

"Your land," she replied, pulling herself away from him. "Goodbye, Father. I will get word to you, I promise."

When they set off it was blustery and gray. Maisie had organized everything perfectly, with enough warm clothes, food, and blankets for at least three days' journey. They were hoping to find farmhouses or small settlements along the way where they could resupply themselves and spend the night. Rosina was not so refined as to refuse the offer of a night in a barn. She had done it once before when she was a child and was hoping that as an adult she could

tolerate it just as well. Maisie had her doubts, but then Rosina was adaptable. She had had to become so over the last few months.

Malcolm rode beside them, saying little. The ladies gossiped for a while then fell silent as the wind picked up and they huddled into their cloaks, tucking them around themselves for warmth. When they were around three hours into their journey it began to rain, fortunately not heavily, but enough to make them uncomfortable. They rode on for a while and were absolutely thrilled to find a tiny roadside inn, very small and not particularly clean, but looking like a palace to the travelers.

The innkeeper, a stout, plain woman with a ready smile and a cheery manner, was friendly and welcoming. Rosina asked for two rooms, but there was only one left, so Malcolm slept on the floor.

"Milady," he said, laughing, "I am weel used tae it. Dinnae fash yersel."

Rosina looked at him doubtfully.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure as sure can be," he replied definitely.

They dined on thick vegetable soup for supper into which they dipped bannocks cooked over the big open fire in the kitchen. The food at the castle was delicious, but this was even more so because as Rosina had discovered, hunger was a great seasoning. They had great mugs of ale and tumbled into sleep to wake in the morning rested and ready for the new day.

Both Rosina and Maisie were sore in every muscle from the unaccustomed exercise, but they had to go on, so they did. Both of them were soaked by the end of the day when they found a farmhouse whose owner allowed them to sleep on the floor of the barn.

"Do you think Logan slept here?" Rosina asked Malcolm as she looked back at the inn. He shook his head.

"Naw, my Lady," he replied, "he willnae' hae wanted tae leave a trail. Likely he'll hae slept under the trees. He has a wee tent tae shelter under. Bought it aff ane o' thae Romany folk."

'He thinks of everything,' she thought.

After they had been riding for a few moments Rosina brought up the subject which had been on her mind ever since she met Logan.

"Malcolm, why is he always so grim? He told me he was a 'lost cause' whatever that means."

"My Lady, he never speaks o' it" Malcolm answered, "I am the closest person he has tae a friend an' I did ask him ance, but" he shook his head, "it was the only time he was ever angry wi' me. Asked me to please mind my ain affairs. That's like him - polite even when he's bein' rude! So I knaw nae mair than you!"

"Do you think he will marry?"

"I cannae' say, my Lady, but I dinnae' think so."

"No heirs then?"

Malcolm shook his head.

"Naw," he said sadly, "I dinnae knaw wha is gaunnae' inherit the castle an' land. He seems tae have nae faimly at a'. but I darenae' ask him ony mair. He is a stubborn man."

'But he is still the man I love.' Rosina thought sadly.

Arriving at Annie's

When Rosina arrived Logan was not even aware of it. It was very early in the morning and he was still snuggled under his blankets. It was a peculiarity of his that he slept with his whole body covered, even his head, because it gave him a great sense of security. When Logan slept, he did not just fall into a state of slumber, he cast himself headlong into a pit of unconsciousness. Many were the times when Malcolm had had to shake him awake with such force that he fell off the bed. Once awake he was alert and ready to face the day, but negotiating the transition between sleep and wakefulness had never been his strong point, so when Annie heard the horses' hooves and rushed out to meet Rosina he was still deeply asleep.

Annie looked out of her bedroom window and saw Rosina, Maisie, and a stranger whom she took to be a servant dismounting in the

cobbled courtyard. She put a shawl on over her nightdress and threw the front door open, then went forward, smiling from ear to ear, to kiss her hand and curtsy.

"Lady Rosina!" she said joyously, "how are you? You look just like your name - a little Rose!"

Rosina laughed.

"How often have I told you to call me 'Rosie,' you stubborn woman?" she went forward to embrace Annie and after a moment's hesitation, Annie returned the hug.

"And Miss Maisie!" Annie put her hands out to clasp Maisie's, "ye get

prettier every time I see ye!"

"Thank you, Mrs McNab!" Maisie laughed.

"Ye willnae' be calling me that for much longer!" Annie said mischievously, "in November I will be Mistress Anderson!"

Rosina put her hands on her cheeks and squealed in delight. She took Annie's hands in hers and congratulated her.

"*T*hat is wonderful news, Annie!" she said rapturously, "a beautiful woman like you should not be alone so long - you have been a widow for ten years and it is past time you were married again!" "Then she turned around and brought Malcolm forward. "Forgive me, Malcolm, I am being very rude, but I was so pleased to hear your news, Annie! This is Malcolm, Logan's man. He has escorted us two chattering impossible women all the way from Dumbarton."

In all the excitement they had forgotten about Logan.

"Is Logan here?" Rosina asked, at last, looking around as though he were standing behind him.

"*N*aw, he's still sleeping, but he will likely wake wi' a' the racket we're makin'!" Annie laughed.

"Naw he willnae', Mistress McNab!" Malcolm put in, his eyes twinkling, "yon big lump could sleep through a cannon firin' next tae his lugs! He will likely sleep through the Last Trump itsel'!"

Everyone was laughing heartily by this time, trying to picture the scene. Annie made tea, then scrambled eggs and fried home-made black puddings for breakfast. The bread would not be ready for a while, so the women busied themselves tidying the kitchen while Malcolm saw to the horses. Annie was always uncomfortable when she gave Rosina manual labor to do, but she laughed.

"Annie, I have been cosseted all my life. It's time I learned to do a few things for myself," she was brushing the floor as she spoke, and looked up, "and it will not kill me!"

"I suppose not, my Lady, but those nice soft hauns o' yours will be a thing o' the past!"

When the bread came out of the oven an hour later, Logan had still not arisen.

"I will wake him, my Lady," Malcolm said grimly, standing up and making for the stairs.

"No," Rosina's voice was mischievous but wicked, "I will do it. I want to see his face!"

"*B*ut my Lady," Malcolm objected, "the Laird aye sleeps - ye know - wi' nae claes."

"I have seen a naked man before," Rosina lied primly. Alasdair had died before managing to disrobe.

*M*alcolm looked at Maisie, who shrugged. Rosina had made up her mind, and short of knocking her unconscious, there was nothing she or anyone else could do about it.

She went upstairs. then stood outside Logan's door and knocked tentatively, then, when there was no response, she knocked a bit harder, till finally, she was banging on it so hard the walls were vibrating. She took a deep breath and opened it, to see the blanket-shrouded bump in the middle of the bed. When Maisie came up to see if anything was amiss, Rosina shushed her and went to the foot of the bed.

She had always had a well-developed sense of mischief and now she put both hands underneath the blankets and began to tickle his feet. There was a grunt from the other end of the bed, and she began to tickle the feet harder, all the while giggling herself. Then they began to kick and eventually Logan erupted into a roar of laughter. He pulled his feet up and his head emerged from under the blankets, hair endearingly tousled. He looked gorgeous. Then she saw with astonishment that he was laughing in his sleep, and as she took her

hands away he turned over, flicked the cover over his head, and abandoned himself to slumber once more. Maisie shook her head and ducked out of the room.

Rosina went around the side of the bed and climbed onto it, then lay down looking into his face. He was flushed from having his head submerged under the blankets and his long lashes were lying on his cheekbones. There was a sheen of blue stubble on his cheeks and she ran her fingertips down it, feeling it rasp against her skin. A jet of desire shot through her and she felt like lifting up the blanket and climbing inside the bed with him, but she resisted, knowing that there were too many people around, and the time was still not right. But she kissed him, slowly and sensually on his mouth, and when she drew away he was looking at her in a puzzled fashion.

"Rosina?" he frowned, "am I dreaming?"

She laughed and brushed back a lock of black hair.

"No, Logan, you're not," she said quietly.

Tentatively he raised a hand to touch her cheek, and the corners of his mouth twitched up in a little smile.

"They told me that getting you out of bed was a mission that needed the services of a cannon," she laughed, "but I think kisses work better."

"Oh god, Rosina," he said huskily, "you are irresistible."

Then he kissed her, passionately, almost painfully, and she heard herself make a little involuntary moan. He tore his mouth away from hers to look into her eyes and whispered:

"I told myself this would never happen again. I told myself that the things I felt for you were just the urges of my body, but they are not," he searched her face as if trying to memorize every one of her features. "But this will not - cannot happen again, although you will never know how much I want it to."

"But why not?" she asked desperately, "you are a free man, and my

husband is dead, so I am a free woman. My marriage was not consummated so I can even offer you the gift of my virginity. Why not, Logan? Why can we not be wed?" she took his hand and put it on her breast where he let it rest. He squeezed a little, feeling its soft roundness under his fingers. He groaned, sighed and took it away. His body was beginning to react to her, as hers was to him, and it was the most difficult thing he had ever had to do. He kissed her hand.

"Because I am not the man you think I am, Rosie," he said huskily, "and now I think I should get up. Will you go downstairs, please?"

She got up off the bed and went to the door, then paused and turned around to say something, but he had stood up and was facing her, naked. Her whole body trembled. She put her hand to her mouth.

"Oh, god," she said hoarsely, "you are so beautiful." Then she fled.

Monique

As Hugh watched them ride away it occurred to him that his proposal to Maisie had been born out of loneliness than anything else. He had a comfortable life, like so many of his friends. He could go out and hunt deer or pheasant, go fishing, dancing, drinking or gambling with friends and even flirt with their wives and daughters if he chose. His land was productive, his tenants happy, and even if he were as poor as a church mouse, he would never starve with the river on his doorstep. And when he looked out at the busy, squally, temperamental River Clyde that ran past his home, he felt almost painfully happy, except for one thing. When his wife had died and left the care of their only daughter to him, he had had no idea how to begin, and it was only with the help of a capable nanny, and later, Maisie, that he had been able to get it right.

But he had done a good job. Rosina was everything a father could have wanted in a daughter, but although she was a delight she was not enough. Perhaps he had spotted a kindred spirit in Maisie. Perhaps she had been lonely too, and somehow they had sensed it in each other. But that was over, and both of them were glad it had come to nothing. Still, alone in his cold bed in the middle of the night, Hugh was lonely for a warm body to hold on to, and a pair of woman's arms to encircle him.

And he had needs that he could not express to Rosina. He was still a vital, vigorous man whose bodily urges were not being satisfied. He could, of course, have gone and paid for the services of a certain type of woman in Dumbarton, but he could not cheapen himself by resorting to that, even if it were safe. He had seen men suffering the diseases borne by these women, and they died a horrible, slow, agonizing death. He shuddered and drank another measure of

whiskey, then another.

Vaguely he realized that he was imbibing too much of the single malt that he particularly loved. It soothed him to sleep most nights. and the next morning he would wake up with a splitting headache which could only be cured by more whiskey. Accordingly, he made a huge sacrifice and gave it to a friend's son on the occasion of his

*t*wenty-first birthday and gave it to him when he was invited to his party.

He felt very depressed. Even here there was still no woman with whom he could socialize, even casually. He felt like giving up, but then he saw a new face and he was immediately smitten. She had lustrous auburn curls piled high atop her head, a swan-like neck, and a tiny waist. He begged his friend's wife Caroline to introduce them.

"*J*uliette Fontaine," Caroline McEwan tapped her on the shoulder and she turned around to face him. Her almond-shaped eyes were a light hazel, and he felt like the only man in the room as she smiled at him, "this is Laird Hugh McPhail."

"Madame Fontaine," he bowed over her hand before kissing it.

"Ah, Laird Hugh!" she pronounced it 'Oooh' and he was enchanted by her exotic accent, "I have heard so much about you!"

"*B*ut I have heard very little about you, Madame!" he replied, smiling his most winning smile at him, "only that you come from Nice?"

"Oui, I have a cousin who met and married a Scottish man and has come to live here. I came to visit. My husband left me my two children to keep me from being too lonely."

Hugh sighed.

"I too suffer from loneliness," he said sadly. "My wife passed on twelve years past and I have never found her equal."

"My husband Henri was a diamond among men," she looked sad suddenly, then brightened up. "There are my children!" she pointed to two mop-headed little blond boys of around ten years old who ran over and threw their arms around Juliette. She bent down then hugged and kissed them both, laughing delightedly.

"These are my two sons Jacques and Jean-Pierre," Juliette introduced them and Hugh bowed solemnly and shook each boy's hand.

"Twins?" he asked, smiling at them. Jacques whispered something in Juliette's ear.

"He says you are very tall! Ah!" she turned to face the main door, "here is ma soeur - my sister - Monique. The boys adore her - she spends nearly all 'er time with them. Monique! Viens recontrer Laird Hugh! Come and meet Laird Hugh!"

Hugh, who had been looking down at the boys, now looked up. His eyes widened and his throat constricted as he looked into the eyes of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He could not tear his eyes away from her face. She was a natural blonde, with the same slender neck and tiny waist as her sister, but her bosom was fuller, and her hair was not dressed flamboyantly like Juliette's but wound in a large coil at the nape of her neck. Her chocolate brown eyes looked deeply into his and he watched as her cheeks flushed and her full lips parted. He might have been smitten by Juliette, but with Monique - this was love - love at first sight.

"My Laird," she stepped forward and curtsied, holding out her hand so that he could kiss it. Her blushing complexion and dilated pupils gave away the fact that she was feeling just the same way as he was.

"Enchanté, Mademoiselle," he said gallantly as he kissed the proffered hand. "For a moment he stood still, not knowing quite what to do or say next, then Monique turned around just as Connor came into the great hall. He was formally dressed and carried his usual air of confident calmness. He smiled as he approached them.

"Good evening, Hugh," they shook hands.

"Well thank you, Connor," he replied, "yourself?"

"Excellent!" then he turned and smiled at Monique, kissing her cheek lightly, "Hugh, I see you've met my beautiful fiancé, Monique."

Hugh managed to keep his smile fixed in place even though he felt as if his heart had plummeted into his stomach.

"Congratulations to both of you!" he said, a little too heartily. "I am happy to hear you are settling down, Connor. It's about time!"

"Aye, you are right," Connor laughed.

"And how did you meet?" Hugh asked, trying to make a decent amount of small talk before he went to mingle with the other guests.

"Our marriage was arranged," he answered frankly, smiling, "but I think we each liked what we saw."

Monique gave Connor a shy smile but said nothing. When she looked back at Hugh again her eyes were sad, as if to say: 'I'm sorry I didn't meet you first.' Then she went over to greet her nephews.

"Jealous?" Connor winked at Hugh, who laughed.

"Which man would not be?"

They watched the back of her blonde head as she tousled the hair of the little boys.

"She will make a fine mother," he said fondly, "she loves children, and longs to have one of her own - our own."

"I am happy for you, Connor," Hugh said warmly, "and now I must go and greet a few old friends. Good evening to you and Monique." Then he left as fast as he decently could.

The Promise

He had imagined it, he thought. There was no such thing as love at first sight. She was pretty, demure, with a certain helplessness that brought out the protective instinct in most males. It was a lethal combination that could turn the head of any man, especially one as lonely and susceptible as he was at this moment. His heart was aching with longing, but he put it all down to his solitude. He was only thinking this way because he had nobody to keep him company at the castle.

Monique looked at the man before her and felt sad. He was so handsome! Connor was too, of course, and this man was old enough to be her father, but that air of maturity only attracted her more. His silver-streaked brown hair was drawn back from his forehead and caught in a leather thong at the nape of his neck, and she could see that he had a gold earring in his left ear. He was straight, tall, and his blue eyes, deep-set under thick brows, had a way of looking at her that made he want to jump into his arms and cry -: 'hold me - you are my safety. Look after me always.' But of course, she did nothing, just watched him walk away and melt into the crowd at the reception.

Connor was introducing her to everyone - he was so proud to be beside her, this beautiful woman who very shortly would become his wife and bear him the child he longed for. He had met Monique not long after Rosina left, and there was no question of her refusing him. She was in no position to - besides, he thought, she could do a lot worse than marry Connor McPhail who came from a good family and an old line. Rosina Buchanan on, the other hand, was an heiress in her own right and could pick and choose her suitors. Looking back, he was glad she had refused him. She was altogether too full of herself, and he had convinced himself that he had never really loved her anyway.

Monique, although the daughter of a baron, was poverty-stricken with the death of her father and Monique's husband, and had no such luxury. But she was charming, quiet and biddable, and had never raised any objection when he kissed her or touched her breasts. He looked forward to the time when he could make her his, but he could wait. A decent time was three months, he thought, and she had agreed with him. In fact, they were already making her dress. Meanwhile, he was delighted to be the envy of every man in the room.

Monique caught her breath as she saw Hugh leaving the hall, intending to leave, she assumed. She had to have an excuse to see him before he left. She tapped her fan on Connor's elbow and whispered something in his ear. He nodded, smiled at her, and went back to his conversation.

Under the pretense of going to the privy, she walked out as fast as she could and caught up with him just as he was putting his topcoat on.

"*L*aird Hugh!" she called. He turned and his face changed. there was a delighted but desperate look in his eyes.

"Monique! What -"

"I wanted to see you before you left," she said quickly, looking over her shoulder to see if anyone was following her. She dropped her gaze and crossed her hands demurely in front of herself, then took a step back to keep a good distance between them. He realized at once what she was doing and kept his own body language neutral. She was flustered but was trying not to show it as she began to speak.

"*I* am sorry - and please tell me if I am wrong -"

"You're not wrong," his glance flicked over her shoulder and he shook his head very slightly to tell her the coast was clear. "The first moment I saw you I knew we were meant to be together, but you are marrying someone else and we have to respect that. And as yet we do not know each other well."

"But I do not want to marry him!" she said furiously, "I never did! Oh,

he is a pleasant enough man and I like him - but there is no attraction - not from me. It is a - how do you say it? A marriage of convenience."

Hugh sighed.

"There is nothing we can do," he said sadly, "I am an honorable man, Monique. I cannot do this to Connor."

She nodded slowly.

"I understand," she said softly, "but we will not be married for three months. It is so little time but we will have memories to treasure. Hugh, I only want to talk, to find out about you, and I want to know what it feels like to kiss you, nothing more," she looked over her shoulder again, "Connor is going to Glasgow on business on Friday. May I come and see you that morning?"

He knew he should refuse - his better judgement was telling him so, but his body and his heart completely overruled it. Then he bowed over her hand formally and kissed it.

"Of course, Lady Monique!" he said, smiling. Connor had come up behind them so Hugh was acting as if he was saying a pleasant farewell. "May I call you 'Lady Monique?' since you are so nearly Laird Connor's wife?"

"Of course," she said pleasantly, "goodnight, Sir Hugh."

Connor smiled indulgently, and as Monique walked away he whispered to Hugh:

"I can hardly wait!" Then he gave him a conspiratorial wink and departed.

'Neither can I,' Hugh thought with satisfaction. He knew that he would have to restrain himself and he knew that it would be difficult, but he looked forward to doing nothing more than sitting in the company of a beautiful woman and talking about homely pleasant things, instead of livestock, crops, the weather and the price of oats or barley. But she had said she wanted to kiss him, and there he was on dangerous ground. He must not let things go too far - he was a gentle man, but a strong one, or so he hoped. But was he strong enough?

Monique, Juliette, and her children lived in a wing of Connor's castle which was situated at the opposite end to his, to stop any suggestion of impropriety. Juliette and Monique slept in one room, the children and their nanny in another. Juliette was so tired after the stressful reception that she went straight to sleep, leaving Monique to think of Hugh. He was the most attractive man she had ever met, in the primal sense. As soon as their eyes met she felt a tingling, throbbing sensation she had not felt for a long time. She felt her cheeks flush and her heart begin to beat faster, and there was something about him that persuaded her that he felt the same. He looked confused, even a little uncertain and when he stepped forward to kiss her hand, his was trembling a little. It was Saturday night. Friday was still six days away - how was she going to stand it?

The Sight

Annie McNab, apart from her gift of 'the Sight,' was a practical, sensible woman who ran her spotlessly clean household like a well-oiled machine. Her gift could have made her rich since many of the townspeople sought her advice in matters of the heart, but she would never charge money for her services. She was of the opinion that her Sight was a gift from God and He would tell her the best way to use it for His purposes. But she was always being showered with gifts of foodstuff, knitted goods, and home-brewed ale. However, since folk had put their hands and hearts into making and growing these things for her, she never refused them but accepted them with gratitude.

Logan found this out when he asked Callum one day as they were sitting by the side of Loch Linnhe fishing for sea trout. He and Rosina had not spoken of the incident in the bedchamber again, although it was between them all the time, in every word they said and every glance that passed between them.

"Callum," he asked curiously, "how long has Annie had the Sight?"

"A' her life, Sir. She says that her mother had it and hers afore that," he laughed softly, "but she says it is a burden sometimes. There are things she hae to tell people that they might no' want tae knaw, even though they ask. She has often hae' to tell women that they are barren, and that breaks her heart. Mony's a time she's come in here greetin' because Mrs McLaughlin or Mrs Ferguson has jist heard the bad news."

"Is she always right?"

"I have never knawn her tae be wrong, sir," Callum replied.

Logan thought for a moment.

"She told me something last night," he said, frowning, "and it is only beginning to make sense to me now. I think I will ask her advice one more time. How should I thank her?"

Callum laughed.

"Your blessing will be enough, Sir," he replied happily.

Rosina and Maisie went out to the market that morning. they had asked Annie but she had declined, with no reason than that she did not want to go. One of the things Rosina had always liked about Annie was her confidence. She never felt the need to explain herself.

As they walked into town Rosina suddenly said:

"I love him."

Maisie sighed.

"I know, Mistress," she said patiently, "you told me before."

"But now I have decided that I want to marry him," she said, with a gleam of determination in her eyes. Maisie sighed.

"Mistress, he will not marry anyone. He has told you that already."

"I know, but Maisie, he will soon realize that he cannot tell me what to do," she said grimly, "I will make myself impossible to resist."

"Do not get yourself with child, Mistress, please!" Maisie begged, horrified.

Rosina let out a peal of laughter.

"Maisie, I am in love, but I am not desperate!"

Maisie looked at her doubtfully.

"Mistress, you are besotted!" she cried, "I have never seen you act like this before! With this man, nothing you do will surprise me!"

Rosina shrugged and said mischievously:

"*I* would give a lot to taste his lips again, Maisie," Rosina said dreamily, "they are so soft."

"Have a care, Mistress," Maisie said dryly, "that your head does not end up the same way!"

Rosina burst out laughing, and Maisie joined in.

"Thank you for the warning, Maisie, but I am afraid it is already too late!"

When they were all seated at the table eating their supper of sea trout from the loch and vegetables from the kitchen garden, Logan was his usual taciturn self, speaking only when spoken to and rarely smiling. After the meal, he intended to speak to Annie privately and

seek her counsel. She was very happy that evening. Somehow the thought of her own upcoming marriage seemed to have taken years off her, and she was slightly tipsy from all the ale she had drunk. Callum was looking at her fondly and laughing at some of her more outrageous pronouncements, for she had a wonderful sense of humor. Logan, as he always did, drank only milk. He would drink tea when it was offered but he preferred the bitter aromatic taste of coffee. However, the chances of getting coffee in Fort William were very slim, so he sipped his milk and resolved to have some coffee sent up to Annie when he got back to the Lowlands - if he ever dared go back there.

When the meal was finished Annie made tea, which Logan once more declined. He took his chance to speak to Annie when she was going into the kitchen, but he could see by her eyes and hear by her slightly slurred speech that she was not going to make any sense.

"I wanted to speak to you, Annie, but the morning will do." He patted her shoulder and began to turn away, then froze.

"Dinnae' gie up the prize, Logan," she said clearly, "take what is yer ain."

He turned back to her, amazed, but she had already gone to join the others.

As always, the thoughts that preoccupied him every night before sleep were of Rosina, but this time it was different. 'Take what is your own.' Was the prize Rosina? And what would he do if she came to him again, this time in the middle of the night, when everyone else was asleep? Would he have the strength to say no to her again? Somehow he doubted it. She was certainly a passionate woman, and although he hid it well, he was a passionate man. He might have been comforted by the thought that down in the Lowlands Hugh and Connor were asking themselves exactly the same question.

Fortunately, Rosina did not try to climb into his bed that night, and Logan did not know whether to be relieved, angry or sorry. Relief, of course, was the best option, but a part of him regretted that she did not find him irresistible. He smiled to himself. He definitely was not that!

Monique and Hugh -A Confession

*H*ugh was petrified. He had faced charging bulls and rearing horses in his time, but this fear was different. He was unable to remember the last time he had talked in a cozy, intimate way with a woman, or kissed one. He only hoped that he did not make an absolute fool of himself by stuttering, babbling or laughing too loudly. He had provided wine in a decanter some of his cook's excellent fruit cake and some ripe home made cheese. He hoped that eating and drinking would keep them both occupied enough not to think of less carnal things.

He wondered if he should send Monique a message calling the appointment off, but he simply could not bear to. He both wanted and did not want her to come. He wanted her to come because he desperately wanted to look into her eyes again and kiss her, but he dreaded it for the same reason. Could he stop himself from going further? But perhaps she would not want to, and that would be unthinkable too. It was no good. The only thing he could do was pace the floor and wait for her, hoping she would not be late - and hoping she would come - or not come. He groaned. This was torture.

*A*s her maid styled her hair and helped her dress, Monique felt exactly the same as Hugh. She too had contemplated not keeping their tryst. She had immediately felt attracted to Hugh in a way she had never felt for Connor, even though he was younger and had fewer lines of experience on his face. Hugh made her feel safe, perhaps because there was something paternal about him, but though she regarded him as a father figure in some strange way, he was a big, strong man, and a very attractive one at that. But she was afraid of

her feelings for him - they were unsettling and made her tremble sometimes.

She stood up and looked at herself in the mirror, satisfied as much as she could be under the circumstances. Her riding habit of deep gold-colored linen brought out the amber highlights in her brown eyes and its hood framed her heart-shaped face perfectly. She took a few deep breaths to calm herself, then turned and swept outside to the stables, where she mounted her horse and rode away before she had a chance to change her mind.

As she approached Dumbarton Castle her dread grew, her heart beat faster and her mouth went dry. When she dismounted and the stable boy took her horse away, she went up the stairs to Hugh's apartments with mounting trepidation. His manservant knocked the door and she was admitted to his office. He was usually seated behind his desk, attending to the copious amount of accounting involved in running his estate, but today he was standing by the window, motionless. However, when he heard the knock at the door he spun around and their gazes locked across the room. Her lips parted and her eyes widened as she looked at him, and suddenly she wondered why she had been so terrified. He smiled, his face lit up, and he came forward to kiss her hand.

"Monique," he said huskily, "how beautiful you look."

She laughed.

"Thank you," she replied, "you are very kind. This is my only riding habit. It is very old."

"On you, anything would look beautiful," he smiled, "come and sit down."

He indicated a couch near the fire for her to sit on, then poured her some wine, but as he moved to go to the chair across from her she pulled on his hand.

"No, sit by me," she begged, looking up into his eyes, "I want you to."

He obediently sat down, but put two feet of space between them. Immediately she slid up beside him and closed the distance. She put

up a hand to touch his face then he closed his own hand over it, meaning to move hers away, but quite unable to do it. He leaned his cheek against it, shut his eyes and breathed a sigh of utter contentment. They might only have an hour or two, but in that time he meant to get to know her as much as he could. After she was married - well, he would deal with it then and try to find someone else. Now he knew why Maisie had been so insistent about marrying for love. There was really no other reason for marrying at all, and if he could not find it there would be no compromise. Unless he fell in love again there would be no-one else. He felt desperately sorry for Monique, but he was helpless.

"I knew it," she said softly, "you feel the same as I do."

"Yes," he opened his eyes, "but all we can do is enjoy this time together. You are Connor's fiancée, not mine."

She nodded slowly.

"Kiss me," she whispered, moving her lips closer to his.

"No," he answered softly, "no, no, Monique. It would be wrong."

"The best things usually are," she murmured, trailing her fingertips down his neck, making him tremble. She loved her power over this big, strong man. She could make him do anything he wanted right now, and he would be helpless to resist.

"Kiss me," she repeated, "please, just this once."

He swallowed. His mouth was dry, his breathing was beginning to thicken and he was shaking. His body was responding in other ways too, and he knew that soon he would weaken and give in to that one kiss. If it were only a single one he would survive, but more than that and he would be lost. She would not let him stop at one, this intriguing, desirable woman who had weapons against which he could not fight. Then she touched his mouth softly with hers and drew back to look at him for a moment.

"*I* love you, Hugh," she said softly, "I have from the moment I first saw you. I do not know why - I just know."

They looked at each other for a few moments more then he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her very close so that their lips were almost, but not quite, touching.

"I love you too, sweetheart," he said tenderly. And then they really were kissing, deeply but very gently, the tips of their tongues just touching. Hugh felt her straining against him and it inflamed him. He didn't know how much longer he could resist before begging her to let him make love to her because that was what they both wanted, he was sure. He pulled away from her gently, gazing into the dark brown depths of her eyes.

"Please..." she whispered, "please, Hugh."

"What if you get with child?" he asked desperately, hoping and yet not hoping it would put her off.

"I cannot," she said sadly, "Hugh - I am not a virgin. I lay with a boy when I was but fourteen years old. We were both children, and we did not know what we were doing. I became pregnant, then lost the baby after four months. After that, the midwife and the doctor said I would never be able to conceive again. Please do not tell Connor."

Hugh was shocked for a moment, then shook his head vigorously.

"Connor is an honorable man. He deserves to know."

She sighed sadly, and pulled away from him, nodding.

"Oui, yes," her voice was very low, and a tear slipped from her eye and slid down her cheek. "But is a secret meeting honorable? Are we not both being dishonest? Connor does not love me, but I knew that. I do not love him either. He loves your daughter, and I can see it in his face and hear it in his voice every time he talks of her."

Hugh was still for a moment, then he gently pushed her away.

"I am sorry," his voice was trembling, "but I cannot do such a dishonorable thing to Connor. We were only going to talk, not make love," he stood up and poured her wine. She took it, sipped it and began to sob quietly.

"Why are you marrying him if you cannot bear him children?" Hugh asked desperately, spreading his hands.

"My family is facing ruin and starvation," she replied heavily, "Juliette's husband lost all his money through some bad investments. My father invested in the same ones and was also ruined, so we are penniless" she stopped to wipe her eyes, "it is difficult for Juliette to marry again with her children, but I am still able to. I need to wed a man who can help me to support my family. I know it is dishonorable - but one cannot eat honor!"

Hugh stood looking down at her for a long time. She was still weeping quietly. He went to the window and drained his glass of wine, then poured himself another and emptied that too. He felt desperately sorry for her - yet he had accused her of being traitorous.

Making Love

"I am sorry that such a thing has happened to you," he said, his expression soft with sadness as he looked down at her.

"I am sorrier for my nephews," she said hoarsely, "and I will do whatever it takes to make their lives happy."

"At the expense of your own?"

"Oui. Yes," she said heavily, "I love them very much. I will never have children, so they are all I have."

"You are a brave and selfless woman, Monique," he whispered. Once more, he was close to her, and he could see the teardrops still glistening on her lashes, "you would sacrifice yourself to a man you do not love for their safety and welfare," suddenly a wave of fierce anger swept over him. "To hell with honor!" he growled, "we both need love now."

He carried her along the hallway to the nearest bedroom. It was a tiny place, a maid's room, and it had only a narrow bed. He laid her on it tenderly, but there was nothing tender about what they did next.

He laid her down on the bed and looked into her eyes for a long moment. She pulled his head down to hers and kissed him with a desperation born of hunger, then arched her body up to meet his, feeling his manhood aroused against her stomach. He cupped his hands around her breasts and kissed them hungrily, almost like a baby suckling his mother.

Please, Hugh -" she whispered desperately.

"Please what?" He growled. She gave him no answer, but wrapped her

thighs around his hips, and they came together in a frenzy of need. Their passionate cries echoed around the room as they both reached fulfilment, then they lay, wrapped in each others' arms, till the afterglow faded. Hugh laughed softly.

"What is so funny?" she asked, leaning on one elbow to look at him.

"Nothing," he replied, stroking her hair, "nothing at all. Do I have to have a reason to laugh or can I not just laugh because I am very, very happy?"

"And why are you happy?" she asked archly, knowing the answer.

"You make me happy," he murmured. He was about to say something else but she was kissing him, and then it all began again, tenderly and lovingly this time. Hugh thought he had landed in heaven. Afterward, they had one more warm and loving embrace, then reluctantly got up and dressed.

Hugh wrapped his arms around Monique once more, laying his cheek on her hair. She fitted perfectly against him, her head tucking just underneath his chin, her cheek right next to his heart which was beating fast now in response to her nearness. She closed her eyes. She could have stood this way forever, but that was impossible. She had been honest with him and told him that she was infertile. Even if she called off her marriage to Connor now she could not beg him to wed a woman who could not give him children. In her heart, she knew that was what he wanted most. Besides, this was the first and last time they would ever make love, and she would treasure and relive every moment of it for as long as she lived because it would never happen again.

*P*resently she sighed and pulled out of his embrace, then tilted her face up for one last kiss.

"May I visit you again?" She begged, "just to talk."

"That is what we both said this time," he pointed out, frowning. "It should not happen again, my sweet. Bring your sister with you next

time so that we will not be tempted, for I cannot betray Connor any more than I have already. But I know one thing."

"What?" she asked huskily, looking worried.

"After today, I love you more than ever," he rested his forehead against hers and closed his eyes.

Monique breathed in the yeasty manly aroma of his body one more time. Some men wore cologne, but she preferred the natural smell of skin and sweat, the essence of him, Hugh. She kissed him passionately one more time then she was gone.

When Monique got back she found Juliette alone in the big sitting room, attending to her needlepoint. She knew the truth about Hugh and had implored her not to go, but Monique had been driven by some force inside her that she could not contain, an animal instinct that drove her towards him relentlessly. Did she regret what she had done? Not for a second. Would she do it again? Absolutely. She knew that she would never be able to leave him alone again - somehow he would always be in her life. And Connor? She would have to go through with the marriage but she would never tell him her secret. God would be to blame for their lack of a child. It would be His will. She put her hat down on a chair and kissed her sister. Juliette looked up at her shrewdly, a question in her eyes. Monique nodded and Juliette shook her head.

"Mon dieu, my god - you are mad!" she said vehemently, "what if Connor finds out?"

"Only you and I know," Monique replied, "are you going to tell Connor?"

Juliette looked angry for a moment, then her shoulders slumped.

"Of course not," she replied, "we need this marriage."

Monique sat down.

"Oh, Juliette - I wish I could marry him. I told him about the baby - I had to."

"Why did you have to?"

Monique shrugged.

"I don't know," she replied, puzzled at her own reactions. "I am marrying Connor but I do not love him, and Hugh is my lover but I cannot marry him, so it does not matter whether I tell him or not."

She was crying silently. Monique got up to embrace her sister.

"You should not have become lovers," she said fondly, "it complicates everything."

"I know - but it was glorious, Juliette!" she said joyfully, and they both laughed.

"Look at you!" Juliette reprimanded her, wiping her face. "one moment you are laughing, the next crying. Go and get changed out of your riding habit. You cannot wear that thing all day. Go!"

Monique had dismissed her maid, so when she went into her bedroom she was all alone. She took off her riding habit and lay on the bed, not meaning to sleep, rather think, but after a while, she slipped into a light doze, and all she dreamed about was Hugh.

When Connor came home he found his future sister-in-law sitting in the smallest of the reception rooms with her sons playing marbles at her feet.

"Good afternoon, Juliette, how are you?" he asked pleasantly as he poured himself a glass of whiskey.

"I am as you see me, Connor," she answered, smiling, "always well."

"Good! Would you like a drink?"

"Sherry, please." She nodded her thanks as he gave it to her.

"Have you seen my fiancée, by any chance?" he asked.

"I think you will find that Monique is sleeping," she replied, "she took a fancy to go riding this morning, and the fresh air always tires her out. I imagine she also walked along the shore of the loch for a long

way. She likes to do that. She may also have gone to see a horse of Laird Hugh's, but I am not too certain about that."

"I see," he took a sip of his drink, "I am glad she is getting some fresh air and exercise. It will be good for her to be fit when she begins to bear children. It is not an easy time for a woman."

"Thank God you will never know, Connor!" Juliette laughed. He joined in, just as Monique entered the room. She was dressed, but still looked flushed and tousled from her nap. Connor thought she looked even more beautiful than usual, but he was annoyed that she had entered the room while still so untidily dressed. What if there had been guests here? He would have been extremely annoyed.

"Monique," he said going forward to clasp her hand, then kiss her on the cheek, "You should not come in looking so - disheveled! We might have guests and I would have been - " Monique did not know the word, but she knew the tone and resented it. Her face clouded

over.

"Embarrassed? Do not speak to me thus, Connor," she said angrily, "I am not a child, and I am not yet your wife!" She was bargaining from a position of weakness, and she knew it, for she could ill afford to lose Connor, but she would not let him humiliate her. However, at this point she had nothing and no-one to fall back on and he knew it.

Connor stepped up very close to her, and Monique saw Juliette leaving the room tactfully with the two boys. They did not need to hear two grown adults quarrelling this way.

"*Have* a care, Mademoiselle," he said, his voice low and menacing. "as you pointed out, you are not yet my wife and you have far more to lose than I have," he stood looking down at her, eyes fixed on hers.

"My apologies, My Laird," she did not sound the slightest bit sorry, "I will go at once to tidy myself up." She curtsied to him and left the room, leaving Connor to wonder if perhaps there was more to Monique than met the eye.

Laughing and Crying

As he woke up the next morning Logan rubbed his eyes, yawned, and thought of the rude awakening of the day before, then laughed. Rosina had a wonderful if childish sense of humor sometimes. He felt like getting up and begging her to come in and wake him again with tickling and kisses. Then he remembered that he had to speak to Annie this morning. He wondered if he should unburden himself to her, after all, he had been carrying his secret around all these years and it had blighted his life. But Rosina had a secret too, and it was not blighting hers, or at least he didn't think so. He looked out of the window and there she was, running around the stable yard,

her light brown hair blowing like a banner in the wind, laughing at something Annie had said. Presently, Annie caught sight of him and waved. He ducked back into the room and then peeped out again to see the two of them in fits of laughter, pointing at his window.

"Hey, Laird!" Annie shouted, "get up afore we get ye up!"

"And we might do something you'll regret!" Rosina could hardly speak for laughing, "there are other bits of you we can tickle, you know!"

Logan grinned. She was completely, maddeningly wonderful.

"Rosina, Rosina," he said to himself as he washed, imagining a Minister joining them in holy wedlock. Presently he heard Rosina's voice outside the door.

"Laird Fraser!" she cried, "are you awake or must I tickle something else?" There was the sound of feminine giggling just outside the door. He was half-dressed, but decently covered, so he tiptoed to the door, counted to three, then wrenched it open and let out a full-throated

roar. Rosina and Maisie fell backward in fright, both of them landing with their backsides on the floor gazing up at him with identical, comical expressions of surprise. He began to laugh as he helped them both up and they joined in till they were all breathless, their stomachs were sore, and crying tears of mirth.

"My god," Rosina said, at last, wiping her eyes, "I have never heard a noise like that in my life!"

Logan's face was once more settling into its usual neutral expression, but Rosina would not allow it.

"I am the Laird of this house," she said pompously, "and I make the rules. And the first rule is - no sad faces!" She looked at Maisie, "Maisie, please leave us. I may have to hurt him and it will not be pretty!"

Maisie smiled and obediently disappeared down the stairs, wondering what her mistress was going to do to Logan. Logan was doing the same thing as Rosina backed him against the wall.

"Rosina, what are you doing?" he asked, unable to stop the note of fondness in his voice.

"Shut up, Logan," she whispered, putting a forefinger over his lips. Then she clamped her mouth over hers, kissing him hungrily and imprisoning him with both arms wrapped tightly around his waist. His first impulse was to push her away, but it seemed that she was stuck to him, and even if he had really wanted to he would not have been able to unless he hurt her. He strained her body to his till they were almost breathless, and when it was over he rested his forehead on hers for a moment and smiled obligingly.

"You have got to marry me, Logan," she whispered, "you know who you are up against, don't you?"

He sighed and shook his head.

"I do," he answered, "the most stubborn woman God ever created."

"Yes, exactly the same woman," she said smugly.

"Then you have met your match, Rosina, for I am the most stubborn man." He pushed her away gently and went downstairs. Rosina felt like banging her head against the wall. Maybe he did not find her attractive and did not wish to tell her so. She sighed loudly, stretched and went downstairs. Shortly after that Logan came in and began eating enough oats porridge to feed a small army. Annie looked at her shrewdly and she tried to appear nonchalant but it was clear that she was upset. Annie set a bowl of porridge in front of her, but she and Logan were alone, and it was a very quiet meal. Rosina took her tea upstairs and informed Maisie that they were going out riding, but Maisie had already laid out her riding habit. Over the years she had come to know that her mistress always found fresh air and exercise a good balm for whatever ailed her.

"Maisie - what's wrong with that man?" Rosina asked plaintively.

Maisie met her gaze in the mirror.

"Mistress, you are pushing too hard," she replied as she plaited Rosina's shining ginger-red hair. "You have to give him room to breathe and time to think. And men like to be the hunters, not the prey!"

"But he's had plenty of time!" Rosina thumped her fist on the dressing table so hard that all the bottles and jars on its surface rattled, and Maisie jumped, "maybe if he stopped feeling so sorry for himself -"

"Mistress, if you will pardon my frankness, I think it is you who are feeling sorry for yourself," Maisie said sternly, "whatever happened in the past, it has scarred Logan very deeply, and you must understand that. You know how badly it hurts when your heart is shattered because it has happened to you too. We do not know his circumstances but have pity on him, Mistress. He has such a low opinion of himself - maybe you should help him to get his confidence back, but it will not help if he runs away every time he sees you!"

Rosina looked angry enough to kill for a moment, then she put her hand over Maisie's on her shoulder and smiled at her fondly.

"You know, Maisie, if I did not love you so much, I would dismiss you on the spot!"

"Yes, Mistress, but I know there is no danger of that because we could not live without each other!"

As they went out they passed Logan and went left after bidding him a cheery farewell. He was toying with his food, thinking about what had just happened when Annie came in and sat beside him, taking his hand. For once, he did not pull it away but waited for her to speak.

"Logan," her voice was very soft, "look at me."

He looked up into a pair of green eyes as dazzlingly bright as his own blue ones. For a long moment they gazed at each other then she said:

"Can ye tell me about it?"

"About what?" He knew exactly what she was asking but chose to pretend otherwise. Why was everyone so interested in his business all of a sudden?

"Your darkness," she whispered, "the darkness ye tried tae leave behind ye but never could. It is there where yer heart is. It stops the light of joy gettin' in, an' ye know who carries the light o' joy?"

He nodded slowly.

"Rosina," he said heavily.

"Aye," she answered, "I have knawn that wee lassie since she wis a bairn, an' she has always been happy and bonnie. You know that I have the Sight?"

"Yes," he pushed his fingers back through his blue-black hair, a gesture he always made under stress.

"I can see right into her heart, an' she loves ye beyond life," she sighed, "maybe she likes lost causes."

Logan stiffened.

"Where did you hear that?" he demanded, "how did you know I said that to her?"

"I didnae'," she replied calmly, "it jist came tae me. Sometimes things dae that."

Logan looked down at her hand still resting on his, then he clasped it in both of his own.

"I am going to tell you something very strange," he said softly, "I have not felt safe in a very long time. I have been running from my past, but it always catches up with me," he looked up, "but I feel safe with you. Maybe you can help me."

Annie reached out and touched his face gently.

"I will try," she said, smiling, "although this gift o' mine comes an' goes at its ain pleasure. But ye must let me in an' no' fight me."

"I want to love Rosina," he whispered, "I do love her and I have since the first moment I saw her, but my 'darkness' as you call it, gets in the way. Every time I look at her I want to wrap my arms around her and hold her close to me forever, but I cannot. She is too good for me."

"Tell me aboot the darkness," Annie moved her chair closer so that their shoulders were touching. She often felt that physical contact helped the psychic energy to flow better. "I will ask an' you will answer."

"Yes," he said numbly, "yes, I will."

Drunk

Annie took a deep breath.

"Is it about a woman?" she asked gently.

He nodded.

"Was she beautiful?"

"I hope she still is," he replied, with the hint of a smile.

Annie hesitated a little.

"Wis she yours, or did she belong tae anither?"

He ripped his hands out of hers suddenly, put his elbows on the table and laced his hands behind his head, moaning piteously. Annie was shocked, but she stayed silent and went to fetch some wine for him. However, as soon as he took the first sip he pushed the glass away so that it toppled over the side of the table and smashed, causing a puddle of blood-red liquid to spread on the wooden floor. Annie let it stay there while she stroked his thick hair tenderly. She felt an enormous tension in him as if he were a coiled spring about to unwind. But the secret within him was so well buried that she could not find it, even though she tried her hardest. She had reached a brick wall. He would not, or could not let her in. He would not tell her with his conscious self, and he could not tell her with his subconscious. He was suffering too much and she could not put him through any more.

"Come on, Logan," she said sadly, "we can dae this anither time. I dinnae want tae break yer heart a' over again."

Logan said nothing more, but got up and left as though the hounds of hell were chasing him. A moment later she heard Maggie's hooves

galloping out of the stable yard. He was running away again.

When Rosina and Maisie came in they were flushed and laughing from the fresh wind off the loch. It had been raining earlier and both of them were wet, if not exactly soaking.

Rosina noticed at once that Annie was very subdued.

"What's wrong, Annie?" she asked anxiously, "are you unwell?"

"Naw, Rosina," she answered, frowning, "no' unwell. No' exactly."

Maisie and Rosina exchanged glances.

"Has it got anything to do with Logan?" Rosina asked, dreading the answer.

"Aye," Maisie handed her some tea, which she had brewed just before they came in, "he wanted tae talk, but I couldnae' get much oot o' him. There wis nothin' in his mind but darkness. I have never met a body that's carryin' sich a load o' misery." then she brightened up

*A*nd looked at Rosina, "but there is ane thing that could make him happy."

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

Annie smiled at her.

"He loves ye - my god, Rosina, I have never before felt sich love!"

Rosina's heart leaped.

"*T*hen why -?"

"Because he cannae' let go o' the past," Annie said sadly, "he told me only ane thing. There wis a woman, but she belonged wi' anither man."

Maisie and Rosina went upstairs to change, then came down to eat

dinner, but even Maisie's delicious mutton stew could not tempt her. She drank two glasses of wine then mopped up some of the gravy with a hunk of bread just to stop the grumbling in her stomach. Darkness was falling but there was still no sign of Logan, and Malcolm was fretting. Rosina could see by the way he jumped at every noise and chewed his fingernails. When he paced to the window again for the tenth time in as many minutes, she put a hand on his arm to stay him. Looking into his face, she could see that it was anguished.

"Malcolm, sit down," she said gently, "and tell me why you are so worried about him."

"Because he is mair than my master - he is my friend," Malcolm whispered hoarsely. He cleared his throat and went on: "when my daughter was only a wee lassie, we went doon the watter tae collect shellfish. My daughter Jeannie wis wae us and she went oot a bit too far. A big wave a came an' was gaunnae' tak her awa' but the Laird himself had ta'en a fancy tae come doon that day. Well, nane o' us could swim, although I had tae hold my Lizzie back because there wisnae' any purpose in baith o' us droonin'. I wis gaunnae try myself when the Laird came oot fae behind, pushed me oot the way an' pulled her oot the watter. He wrapped her in a blanket and put her on Maggie in front o' himsel'. She was shiverin' an' greetin' but as soon as he put his airms roon her she stopped. She has loved him ever since an' so has the rest o' ma faimly. 'Abody thinks he's dour an' grim but they dinnae' knaw him like me. He is a good an' generous man an' if onything happens tae him -"

Just then they heard the sound of horse's hooves outside. Malcolm ran to the window. He breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"It's him," he said thankfully, putting his hand on his chest. He wrenched open the door and rushed outside. Logan was slumped in the saddle, half-on and half-off his horse. A steady stream of drizzle was falling and he was drenched to the skin, but as Maggie came to a halt he fell off her, thankfully being so limp that he did himself no

serious damage. Maisie led Maggie off to the stable while the others picked Logan up. He was a big man and almost unconscious, so it took all of their combined strength to lift him and drag him into the house, where they laid him down in front of the fire. Malcolm began to peel off his clothes, lifting first his shoulders, then his hips, then his legs so that Annie could dry him.

"Is he all right?" Rosina asked anxiously, "what has happened to him?"

"Nothing that hasnae' happened tae thousands o' men thousands o' times before, hen," Malcolm replied grimly, looking up at her, "he is fallin' doon drunk."

Rosina gasped. She was shocked to the core. She remembered that Logan had never taken even a sip of an alcoholic drink for the entire time she had known him. He obviously had a problem with it but was too proud to tell anyone. After all, a man who could not hold his drink was not really a man, was he? But it was more than that. Logan must be one of those men who could not resist a drink and therefore had had to stop drinking altogether, but tonight something had upset him enough to bring back the craving. Annie put a blanket over him to hide his nakedness, and Rosina lifted his head to lay it on her lap, drying his hair gently with a towel. He opened his eyes to look up for a moment and smiled.

"*Rosie*," he whispered tenderly, "love you, Rosie," then he pulled her head down for a kiss.

"I love you too, Sweetheart," she replied. She could see what a sorry state he was in, but her heart was bursting with joy. Logan loved her. She had heard it from Annie, but now she was hearing it from his own lips.

A Big Decision

Even with Malcolm's help, they could not lift Logan up the stairs, so they left him on the floor covered in warm blankets. Malcolm would not leave his side, so they brought in a straw mattress for him from the stables and he fell asleep straight away. Logan, knocked unconscious from the copious amounts of whiskey he had drunk, passed out on the bare floorboards. From time to time Rosina crept downstairs and lifted the blanket over his head to look at him, gazing lovingly at his handsome face, so peaceful in the candlelight. When morning came she rushed downstairs to find him still asleep, his face buried as usual under the bedclothes. Malcolm got up and yawned, looked over at the blanket-covered shapeless mass beside him, then got up to wash. Rosina was tiptoeing around the kitchen, but Malcolm flapped his hand at her.

"Dinnae' worry aboot wakin' him up, lass," he advised, "ye should knaw whit he's like by noo."

"Are you sure he's all right?" she asked worriedly, "he's got a bump on the back of his head the size of a goose egg."

"Well, he wid have had a good enough sore heid anyway," Malcolm replied philosophically, "I jist hope Annie has a cure."

"I'm sure she will," Rosina laughed, "I remember when I came here as a lass she had a cure for just about everything!"

"Aye, she's a fine woman," Malcolm agreed.

An hour later, they heard that Logan had woken up by the sound of a long, agonized groan. By the time Rosina went into the dining room Malcolm was kneeling by his head giving him a drink of water. By the

look on Logan's face it seemed that it was needed.

"Look at the state of you," she was laughing at him, despite his obvious anguish. He put a hand to the back of his head and winced.

"Ow!" his voice was thick and hoarse, and his eyes had purple rings around them. "Where have I been?"

"You have been somewhere you should not have been," Rosina laughed, "in a tavern, by the looks of it. How much did you have to drink, Logan?"

He passed a hand across his eyes.

"Too much, Rosie," he said dully, "far too much."

Annie gave him some milk and he dragged himself to his feet, still wrapped in his blankets, then sat down at the table. Malcolm sat anxiously on one side and Rosina on the other, still stroking his hair. When he had finished his milk, Annie brought him a cup of some evil-smelling brew with the instructions:

"Get that doon yer neck!"

Rosina wrinkled her nose at the acrid stink, but Logan swallowed it in one draught, then shuddered.

"What is that stuff?" she demanded.

"Willowbark Tea," Annie replied tartly, "he'll be right as rain in an hour. We'll gie him a bath an' a'. Logan!" She had shouted right in his ear and he groaned.

"Annie - can't you see I'm sick?" he protested weakly, screwing his eyes shut against the daylight.

"Tell somebody that cares," she replied heartlessly, "ye brought it on yersel'."

She called Alec to boil water for a bath, and Logan trudged upstairs to

lie down till it was ready. Rosina and Maisie went back upstairs as well to prepare themselves for the day, but as they were passing Logan's door he called out:

"Rosie!"

"Logan?" she looked at Maisie, mystified. What could he possibly want?"

"Can you come in for a moment?"

"If Maisie comes with me," she replied doubtfully.

"Maisie can stand outside," came the reply, "I am not going to molest you. I give you my word of honor as a gentleman."

Rosina hesitated for a moment, then nodded to Maisie and opened the door, shutting it softly behind her. He was standing by the windows, still wrapped in his blankets, and she ached to be in his arms.

"I wanted to say sorry," he said sadly, "for all I have put you through the last few days."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Logan," she said quietly as she moved towards him, "you are honest and I respect that."

He closed the distance between them, dropped the blankets and folded his arms around her. There was a towel around his hips and she was not sure whether to be glad of that or not.

"You are so lovely," he whispered into her hair, "but you must please not speak of marriage again. You have seen what a disgrace I make of myself when I drink. I do not know who put me on my horse last night but some kind person must have done it because I could not have done it myself. And that is the least of my faults. Rosina," he looked at her from his sky blue eyes, now soft with love, "forget me. I have a good manager in my property in Renton, and I can stay in the Highlands and look after my other estate. This must be the last time this happens."

"*That* is about the fourth time you have said the self-same thing, Laird Logan," she laughed, "why do you not just acknowledge that we

cannot stay away from each other?"

He frowned, then shook his head in exasperation, picked her up and laid her down on the bed. Her heartbeat quickened as she wound her arms around his neck and he kissed her, pulling her so tightly against him that she could feel his natural male response to the pressure of her body against his. She wished he had not insisted on Maisie being so close, but perhaps it was to protect themselves from themselves.

Logan could not believe that he had her in his arms, lying in his bed and saying tender endearments. It was more than he had ever hoped for, but this really was the last time.

"I love you, Rosie, I love you, love you, love you," he whispered, then he rolled away from her and stood up as Maisie knocked on the door.

"Bath is coming, Mistress!" she called loudly. She opened the door and Alec brought the big copper tub in. Behind him came Malcolm, carrying two large buckets of hot water. He looked shocked to see her, but said nothing as she swept past him. Alec left and the two men stood looking at each other. Malcolm spoke first.

"Was that wise, Sir?"

Logan smiled. "Nothing happened beyond a kiss or two, Malcolm."

"May I speak plainly, Sir?" Malcolm asked as Logan stepped into the water. Logan looked surprised. Malcolm had never asked such a thing of him before.

"Of course, Malcolm. What is it?"

Malcolm sat down on a chair and thought for a moment.

"I think the Lady Rosina wid make ye a fine wife, Sir. Naw -" he held up his hand as Logan was about to protest, "hear me oot, please. I knaw ye suffered some terrible pain in the past and it near broke yer heart, but is she no' the lass tae help ye mend it? Wid a wee bairn or two no' be jist the thing?"

Logan was silent for a while.

"If that suggestion had come from anyone but you, Malky," he said, "I would have had a few choice words to say to them, but you are my friend, and I value your advice. I have had so much of it from everyone these past weeks it's a wonder my ears are not bleeding!" he frowned. "But something has come of it. I cannot carry this burden around for much longer by myself, so I will find a way to tell her. Does that please you?"

"Indeed it does, my Laird," Malcolm smiled from ear to ear, "an' if it dis mean that ye get wed I will be the happiest man alive."

Cockles and Mussels

Connor was uneasy. Something about the way Monique had spoken to him had jarred on him. He knew she was completely in his power because he was in a position to eject her from his castle and leave her destitute, but it would give him no pleasure to do so. A woman had crossed him that way before and he had never forgotten it. Still, he would forgive her. She would no doubt think twice next time.

Just then, the subject of his thoughts came striding towards him, dressed to go riding with her nephews at her heels. Personally, Connor found them rather irritating, since they were always playing around his legs and squealing. The noise drove him mad. It was even more annoying to have to pretend to be charmed and amused by them. One thing he was certain of - his inheritance would not be passed on to them! That was why he needed this young, fertile woman and a son to whom he would pass on his estate. Now, she smiled at him.

"We have mended our little contretêmps of last evening, Mon Chèr?" she asked prettily, looking at him from under her long dark lashes.

He laughed.

"How could I stay angry with someone as beautiful as you, Monique, my love?" he kissed her hand, then gave her a mischievous smile

"How I wish we were already married - then we could mend our quarrels in the bedchamber!"

Monique assumed a theatrical expression of shock.

"My Lord!" she said, in tones of deep disgust, "you dishonor me!"

Then she burst into a fit of giggles, and he joined in with his deep masculine laugh. The quarrel had been mended, and Monique breathed a deep sigh of relief. She must learn to bite her tongue in future.

She was taking Jacques and Henri down to the river front to play that day, and they were all in high spirits, for the weather was fine, if absolutely freezing, and the stiff breeze was whipping up white horses on the water. The boys loved picking up shells and skimming stones across the wave crests, and they loved to be with Monique too, for she helped them to make up ridiculous stories and poems and generally acted like a child herself.

They were learning to speak English and were picking it up at an astonishing rate, although many Scots words were finding their way in too. They were also acquiring the cadence of Lowland speech, which Monique thought adorable. Now she sat with her hands around her knees, looking across the river to Langbank, thinking about Hugh.

They had had two more trysts, and even with her limited experience, she knew that he was a wonderful lover. And he was kind, perhaps because he knew that she wanted his company for his own sake and not because she had been bought. Bought - yes, that was the right word. There was ostensibly nothing wrong with Connor and he had never raised a hand to her, but he did occasionally like to remind her how much she owed him, and how much he intended to collect. Sometimes she was afraid of what would happen when it became apparent that she was not going to become pregnant. She would then be useless in his eyes. Would he make up some pretense to get rid of her? She sighed. She had been happy enough to go along with the arrangement until she met Hugh, but now - she could not imagine life without him.

When it was time to go back she mounted both boys on their ponies, thinking how charming they looked in their McPhail tartan kilts. Soon they would be more Scottish than French. they were idling back along the bridle path when a familiar figure came along,

riding his great chestnut mare Bella. Hugh took his hat off and bowed to them.

"Milady," he smiled at Monique, "gentlemen," he said to the boys, who giggled and imitated his bow.

"*L*aird Hugh," Monique answered, "it is a fine day, is it not?"

"It is indeed," Hugh agreed, "and what have you two little tykes been doing?"

Monique translated, then Jacques and Henri opened the little pouches they carried to show Hugh their shell collection. Hugh dismounted, then they emptied the shells on the ground and he told them what each one was called. He made them repeat the names after him so that they would know each one when they saw them again.

"This one is a cockle, a whelk, a mussel and a limpet," he said patiently, waiting for Monique to translate, "now when I point, tell me the name of each one." He began to point and they told him the names of the shellfish that had once inhabited the shells. Jacques seemed to be the more confident of the two, and he began to ask Hugh in hesitant English and much sign language if he would bring them to the beach to collect some to eat.

"Bien sur," Hugh told him, "of course. We will arrange a time next week when I am less busy."

"Aaah!" Monique clapped her hands, "tu parle Français! You speak French!"

Hugh cast his eyes heavenward.

"About seven words," he confessed, laughing, "hello, goodbye, of course, thank you, please, sorry and excuse me!"

The boys had mounted and ridden on a little way, so she took the opportunity to whisper to him:

"When will I see you again?"

He looked at her with a desperate, loving gaze.

"I wish we did not have to do this," he said tenderly, "I know it is wrong but I cannot keep away from you. Come on Monday."

She sighed.

"*Three* more days - I will be counting every minute!" Then she rode off after the boys and Hugh went home, his mind, as usual in a turmoil.

Juliette and Monique

Monique got back to the estate and stripped off her clothes.

She disliked the maid that Connor had provided for her intensely, and had refused to let Agnes close to her. Connor had offered her the services of another woman, but she had declined, saying she preferred to help herself, which she did. Accordingly, she dressed herself, did her own hair and the myriad other services a lady's maid would perform. She even made her own bed, although the household servants considered her very peculiar and even a little impertinent for doing this. It was, after all, the chambermaid's job. However, doing so gave Monique an additional measure of privacy, and she valued this.

Now she valued it even more, as she stripped down to her underwear and got under the woolen blanket. It was cold at first then warm as she dozed off to sleep dreamlessly for two hours. She got up at midday, dressed, and went down to see Juliette. It was strange, but when Connor was out she felt more relaxed and free, and she wondered if she would always be like this or if it would change when she got married. She knew that he was going out to dinner that night with a crowd of fellow landlords, and she was glad. It would give her time to read, do some sewing or knitting and play with the children.

They were a burden Connor had been forced to bear, she knew because they came as a package deal. She had insisted on it, even though she knew that he didn't care what happened to them. But she would rather have starved with them than let them starve alone. Still, he could throw her out at any moment, so she had to put up with his moods. Now that she had been in Hugh's expert and loving embrace, she did not enjoy the thought of making love with him, but that too was a cross she would have to bear. It would take him a while to realize that there were never going to be any babies, and by that time

she had to make sure he had fallen in love with her. She was going to be the most submissive, attentive, loving wife ever. He was a good man, she knew, so it should not be too hard, since she was genuinely fond of him, his one fault being that he was not Hugh.

When she entered the parlor Juliette was there with the two boys who were wrestling on the floor. She laughed at their antics - they were like little lion cubs from the same litter.

"Ça va?" Juliette asked, "how are you?"

"Ça va bien, merci. Et tu?" she replied, "fine thanks, and you?"

"Bien, merci," Monique replied, "fine, thanks."

They always relapsed into French when Connor was out, speaking English only when he was in the room because he became peevish and sulky when he was left out of a conversation, and would always politely reprimand them whenever it happened.

Monique sat down in a chair opposite her sister and gazed into the fire for a while.

"You look so sad," Juliette observed anxiously. Monique nodded sideways at the boys and her sister, catching on, said:

"Go and find out what is for lunch, boys!"

They gave a combined whoop of delight then scrambled up and sprinted off to the kitchens. They were not allowed to go there but it had never stopped them before.

The two sisters gazed fondly upon them and laughed, then Monique's face changed.

"Oh," Monique said sadly, "Juliette - if only -"

"I know," Juliette put her arms around her sister, "and I wish I could make you a present of a child - but I cannot!"

They sat silently for a moment the Monique laughed softly.

"You know that when he finds out there will be no baby," she said wryly, "even if I had had seven babies before it would still be my fault. No man can ever accept that he is anything less than perfect!"

"What do you mean?" Juliette laughed, "every man is a perfect man - in his own mind!"

Monique frowned.

"I know I must go through with this and I will, but since I met Hugh - it will be very hard."

Juliette caught her sister's hands in her own.

"I am going to tell you something that no-one knows except Maman and Papa," she said steadily, looking into Monique's eyes. "Before I was married to Henri I had a love affair with a married man. He made me pregnant, and after that wanted nothing to do with me. So you see, you and I are not so very different, ma Cherie. Henri had wanted to marry me for a long time, but I refused him, because he was short and not too handsome, although he was clever and funny. But I needed someone to turn to, and he was there.

I told him about the babies so that he could perhaps give me money to procure an abortion since I did not want to tell our parents. He thought for a moment, then said that he could not do it, but he could marry me and bring up the baby as his own, and that is when I began to love him, so a shallow little girl became a mature and happily married woman. I adored him till the day he died. We never had children of our own, to my eternal sorrow, but he loved those boys as if they were his natural children."

"So they are another man's sons?" Monique asked incredulously.

"Yes, but you never guessed, did you?" Juliette smiled, "and they must never know, Monique. But what I wanted to say was that you may not go into this venture loving him - although I was fortunate - but it may still be a very happy marriage."

Monique nodded and smiled.

"You may be right. I will do the best I can," they embraced each other then Connor came in. He had been touring his land with one of the managers, and he looked tired but strangely happy. Juliette smiled and greeted him, then excused herself, tactful as always.

"Pardon me, Connor - the boys are in the kitchen - I must see if they

are driving cook mad!"

They laughed and Connor sank down on a padded couch beside Monique. He gazed at her, a faint smile playing around his lips. In November sunset began early in the afternoon, and the first hint of it began to show in the gloomy clouds, which were beginning to shade into the color of charcoal. There would be no scarlet splendor tonight.

Connor leaned over to kiss her and she responded gently, smiling when she drew away.

"You look tired," she said worriedly, "and you are still going out this evening."

Connor passed his hand over his eyes.

"I'll get some coffee," he said, looking deeply into her eyes. He rang the little bell beside him and ordered it without taking his gaze off her face. "I am so glad we're alone," he whispered.

"Why?" she traced the outline of his lips with her forefinger.

"Because I wanted to talk to you," he took her hand in his and touched her engagement ring with his thumb. It was gold with a huge ruby in the middle with a small diamond on each side.

"You know, I thought I loved Rosina," he became pensive, his thoughts turning inward, "I loved her since she was fourteen before she even became womanly. I waited for her to grow up. I saw her every chance I could - every event, every horse race, every party. But as I was about to ask Hugh if I could court her she met my brother - you know all this already, of course." He frowned and gathered his thoughts. "They met and someone killed him on their wedding night. I have to tell you that though I loved my brother when we were children, I hated him just before he died. I was more unhappy about how upset Rosina was than about my own brother's murder." He sighed.

I asked her father permission to court her then but she rejected me - for reasons I won't go into now - then you came along. I know our marriage was arranged by your aunt, but the first time I saw you - I could not believe how beautiful you were. But beauty isn't everything, as I'm sure you know, but piece by piece I began to fall in love with

you, and now I can say with my hand on my heart that I am yours."

Monique's eyes filled with tears, but not of joy, as he thought, but of sadness, because she was betraying this wonderful man.

Letters

"*You* look happy," Hugh said, smiling at Connor as they stood together at the whiskey decanter. Connor sighed in contentment.

"Hugh, I have every reason to be happy," he replied, "I have riches enough, warmth, shelter, enough to eat and I am marrying the most beautiful woman in the world in two months. What reason do I have not to be happy?"

Hugh felt like a worm. This man was going to be deceived and disappointed and he, Hugh Buchanan, was going to be part of the duplicity. Suddenly he hated himself. He had to end it with Monique, and to do that he would simply not let himself be in her presence again till after the marriage.

The fact that she could not have children was a matter between her and Connor and he had no inclination and no need to be involved in it. But when he thought of Monique's nephews - how he would love to have children running around the castle again, getting under his feet, climbing trees, playing by the river's edge and collecting shells. Perhaps he could even take them fishing. He knew that Connor regarded the boys as something of a nuisance, but to him, they would be a joy. But that was wishful thinking. Tonight he would have to pen a letter to Monique telling her that they would never be lovers again. He knew it would break her heart - it had already broken his.

He ate the magnificent meal his host had prepared for his guests, even though he had to force down the little bit he could manage, and it took all his willpower not to overdose on the generous amounts of whiskey, wine, and ale on offer.

Even so, he was a little tipsy as he mounted his horse to go home. The butler opened the front door for him and after that, he went into an empty house that was as silent as the grave. The lanterns were lit everywhere in his wing of the castle, but they were not necessary. As

he got into bed and looked at the empty pillow beside him, he thought of Monique and a tremendous wave of self-pity washed over him. He should be holding her here beside him. He began to weep silently, but after a while exhaustion claimed him and he fell asleep, weeping silent tears.

When Hugh woke up next morning he was surprisingly lucid, without a headache or any other unpleasant symptoms of a hangover, then he suddenly remembered with a leaden thump of depression that he had to write a letter to Monique. He decided to do it right there and then to get it over and done with because thinking about it all day would make the whole feeling of utter dread worse. He sat down at his writing desk, dipped his quill in ink and thought for a moment, then he wrote:

"My Dear Monique,

This is a very difficult letter for me to write, and no doubt it will be equally difficult for you to read, but I must write it because I feel that it is very dishonest to all of us to let things go on as they are. We are both deceiving Connor, a decent man who does not deserve to be so badly treated. I might have been able to live with myself had I not met him last night when he told me how much he loved you and was looking forward to your wedding. It is not the kind of subject gentlemen usually discuss. So, my Sweetheart, I must let you go for both of our sakes and for Connor's, and believe me when I tell you that it is the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my whole life. I will love you forever and always,

Your Devoted Hugh."

He sealed the letter then gave it to a manservant with instructions to deliver it straight into Monique's hands. Failing that, she was to give it to her sister. Then he ate a hurried breakfast and left in case he crossed paths with her.

Monique received the letter, read it and nodded slowly. She had been half-expecting something like this to happen and now it had. She was almost relieved that the decision to break things off had been taken out of her hands, even though she was heartbroken to know that they would never lie together again. She hoped her English was good

enough to express how she felt, but she knew Hugh would realise that it came from the heart. She wrote:

"Mon Chèr Hugh

Thank you for your letter, which I read with deep sadness. I realize that you are right in everything you say and that we must part, even though it breaks my heart to do so. I will remember our time together with great joy and affection, and you will be in my heart and soul forever.

Farewell, My Dearest Love

Monique.

She decided that the only person she could trust with the letter was Juliette, who asked her what was making her so sad.

"Hugh has ended things between us," she said softly, "he sent me a letter. He is right, it had to end, but it does not make it hurt any less."

"For him too, I expect," Juliette said, as she read Hugh's letter. "Oh, Monique - I am so, so sorry!"

"The fault is mine," Monique said, shrugging, "as soon as I saw him I knew. I knew he was the only man I could ever love. I used to laugh at the notion of 'love at first sight,' but now it has happened to me - and it is not funny." She turned on her heel to pour herself a large glass of whiskey. "Go Juliette, before the rain comes."

"You will be all right?" Juliette asked anxiously.

"I'll be fine. Just go."

Monique watched her sister riding away from the castle as the first drops of rain began to fall and she began to weep.

The Restless Logan

Annie's wedding was at the end of November. It was a small, intimate service to which only Annie's and Callum's families, Rosina, Logan, and Annie had been invited. Afterward, they had a little reception with a meal at Rosina's house, then the newly-weds were sent off to spend their wedding night at the best inn in the village. The morning after the marriage Rosina and Logan packed Annie and Callum off for a surprise week-long honeymoon in Inverness with a generous allowance to spend entirely on themselves. Annie was speechless when she saw the pouch full of silver coins and Scots Pound notes and there were tears in both her and Callum's eyes as they thanked them both profusely.

"I have never seen so much money, Rosina!" Annie put her hand on her chest, almost overcome with emotion.

"I hope you will spend it wisely," Rosina smiled, "on fine food, whiskey, good wine and new clothes. And you must stay at the best establishment in the whole of Inverness or I will want to know why!"

"As will I!" Logan chimed in, "and I want no presents bought for anyone but yourselves!"

"You are both so good - thank you!" Callum's voice was breaking as he shook Logan's hand and kissed Rosina's.

"What about the housework?" Annie suddenly remembered. Her face was panic-stricken.

*R*osina laughed heartily.

"Trust you to worry about a thing like that at a time like this!" she shooed Annie into the waiting carriage, which they had hired for the occasion. "I spoke to your niece and she is sending a 'mature and sober lady' - her own words - from the village. Happy now?"

"*Aye*, lass," Annie smiled then Callum and she waved as they drove away. Rosina wiped a tear from her eye.

After all the preparations and the wedding itself were over, Logan found himself fretful and bored. Rosina and Maisie amused themselves with chess, sewing, knitting, reading, and cards, in which they gambled light-heartedly for buttons instead of coins. They often tried to include him in their conversations but he had very little knowledge of the things women talked about. When Annie had once offered to teach him to knit, he had thrown back his head and laughed uproariously. It wasn't unheard of for men to knit, but he held out his hands, almost twice the size of Annie's, and said:

"*M*istress Annie, do you think these fingers could hold a needle without breaking it?" Rosina and Maisie had been in hysterics.

Malcolm was happy when Annie and Rosina read aloud to him, and he often spent his time carving pieces of driftwood into beautiful figurines. This enchanted Rosina and Maisie, and was a talent which he had possessed his whole life, he told them. Logan sometimes went fishing with Malcolm when weather permitted, which was not often.

But one day, when the weather was unexpectedly dry and sunny Logan decided that the time was right to go to his castle in Fort Augustus. It was a long time since he had been there so he had no idea what state of repair it was in, even though he had had regular messages from the Chief Steward and Estate Manager. No-one had actually been living there since Logan's father's death ten years previously, and Logan was eager to see his boyhood home again, as

was Malcolm, who had never been there.

"Would anyone like to come with us to Fort Augustus?" he enquired the following morning, already knowing the answer. Rosina looked up eagerly.

"Absolutely!" she said excitedly, "when are we going?"

Logan gave her one of his rare and delightful grins.

"Is the day after tomorrow soon enough?" he asked, "we need to prepare."

Rosina nodded happily.

"We will have to be back before Christmas though," she said doubtfully, "can we do it?"

"I'll make sure of it," he replied, "Mr. and Mrs. Anderson will be furious if we don't!"

*R*osina sat thoughtfully for a moment.

"Was your castle occupied by the English?" she asked curiously.

He shook his head.

"It was one of the few properties that wasn't," he answered, "they took most of our livestock and crops to feed their soldiers, though, giving our people just enough to live on. As soon as they were sure the Rebellion was over, they left. I was a child then, only three years old, so I can't remember them. I stayed there till I was older, then came to the Lowlands. My father had taught me all he knew about estate management so I was well set up to keep the Lowland castle going."

"Hm." Rosina said shortly, "my father never taught me anything to do with farming or estate management. I do know how to run a household, but I would rather be a farmer any day of the week!"

"Mistress," Maisie interrupted, "if God had wanted us to be farmers he would have given us muscles instead of breasts. And my mother and

sisters all say that if men were able to bear children they would only have one!"

Logan nodded.

"I do not think I would have the strength to carry such a burden for nine months without help!" he admitted, "you are right, Maisie. You are far stronger than we feeble men!"

They spent the rest of the day preparing their clothes for the journey, which Maureen, the 'sober, mature lady' laundered for them and hung before the fire. The next day was spent making food and packing, then they all went to bed early, at about eight o'clock in the evening.

Maisie was one of those people who had a built-in alarm clock which was usually set for whatever time she needed to wake, so when it went off at six o'clock she went downstairs to make tea for everyone. Maureen lived in the village and was not going to come to work till nine am when the sun rose, so Maisie thought she was going to be alone in the kitchen. To her surprise, Logan was there. He looked around when he saw her.

"Good morning, Maisie," he said pleasantly, "did you sleep well?"

"I did, thank you, my Laird," she replied, "and you?"

"Well enough," he said, yawning.

"You are up very early," she observed, as she put the kettle on the fire, "the Mistress and I thought we might have to tickle you again!"

He laughed softly.

"This time I might tickle you back," he said wryly, "I haven't been up for very long, and anyway we must go quickly. We're starting off in the dark but I do not want to end our journey in it. The road is winding and stony. I do not want the horses to slip."

Maisie made the tea and took a cup up to Rosina, who was already washing. Her riding habit was laid out on the bed, a job which Maisie usually did for her, but all mistress and servant rules seemed

irrelevant now. This was an adventure and not the time for niceties.

"*M*orning, Maisie!" Rosina smiled, "how were your dreams?"

"In truth, mistress, I cannot remember!" Maisie laughed, "and yours?"

"I was dreaming about sailing on a great boat on a calm sea with the sun going down in a great ball of fire," Rosina said, "then a storm came up and the water came over us in a great wave, and I was very frightened that my new white dress was going to be ruined - and then I woke up!"

"You weren't worried about drowning, Mistress?" Maisie laughed, "but of course the dress was far more important! Annie would probably be able to tell you the meaning, but I'm afraid I have no clue!" She was folding Rosina's clothes and putting them into panniers for the pack horse.

Maisie finished with Rosina then went to wash and pack. Logan and Malcolm were already standing in the kitchen when they went down. Rosina had once commented on the fact that men always seemed to take only minutes to wash and dress, whereas it took women hours.

"That's because they don't mind being dirty, Mistress," Maisie had said dryly.

They made a hasty breakfast of eggs, bread, and more tea then set off.

Trouble

They had been riding for some hours, stopping to eat and making good time. When they were three miles away from Fort Augustus, however, they ran into trouble. As they trotted along a tree-lined section of the road four men appeared in front of them so suddenly that the travelers had no chance to avoid them. They wore the uniform of English soldiers, but they were tattered and dirty. Logan at once knew that they were deserters, alone and desperate. All were bearded and looked skinny and hungry, but each carried a sword, and their intentions were clear. Logan remembered the time he had talked his way out of a similar situation, and now he remained calm, praying that Maisie had her big dagger with her. It did not have the reach of a sword, but it was still a lethal weapon. He himself was armed, as was Malcolm, but his sword was mostly hidden by a pannier.

"Good afternoon, Gentlemen," he said pleasantly, "what can I do for you?"

"Get off your horse, for a start," the soldier said menacingly. He had a Southern English accent. Logan remained immobile.

"And then?" he asked calmly.

"Then we will tie you up," he went on, "and take your horses, food, money - and ladies." He looked at his companions, who were laughing in their throats and leering at the women. Rosina was pale with fear but Maisie was looking at the ragged and dirty figure with her nose wrinkled and her lip curled in disgust.

Logan stared down at the man for so long he became uneasy. These were trained soldiers, but they were out of condition and out of

practice. It was obvious they had been living rough for a while. Logan looked down at him for a long moment. His sky blue eyes had darkened and were as cold and hard as flint.

"*I* will give you all my food and some money," he said evenly, "but we are not carrying much."

The soldier sniffed and wiped his nose. He might have been a handsome man at one time, for he was tall and dark, with a thatch of thick black hair and a bushy beard, but now he was bedraggled and dirty.

"We want your women," the man insisted, taking a threatening step forward and putting the point of his sword right under Logan's chin. Logan sat still and unflinching.

"I am sure the ladies are flattered, But I think they would rather come with us," he said calmly.

"*I* don't think they have a choice!" the soldier barked.

"Oh, yes they do," Logan's voice was low and deadly, even though his head was still immobile due to the sword point, "because they come with us now or I will kill you."

"With what?" the soldier sneered. The other three were slowly moving around to get behind Maisie and Rosina, but Malcolm, who had said nothing up till now, had surreptitiously handed his big hunting knife to Rosina. She had no idea how to use it, but it looked threatening, and it was better than nothing. She quickly tucked it into the folds of her skirts.

Logan still could not move because of the sword under his chin, but Malcolm did. When a second man came to haul him off his horse, he pulled on the reins and kicked her flank so that she reared then skittered sideways, knocking the man off his feet so that he landed awkwardly on his chest and his sword passed into his shoulder. It was not a serious wound, but it incapacitated his arm, and in a moment Malcolm was spurring his horse around in a tight circle. Maisie,

meanwhile, had slashed a deep cut in the arm of another man, and Logan had swiped the tall dark man across his stomach. He collapsed on the ground, writhing in pain. But it was not over. One of the other soldiers had managed to clamber up on Rosina's horse and was holding a sword to her throat. She was so terrified that she could not make a sound.

"Now," he growled, "who wants to kill this woman? If any of you touches me, this girl dies. I don't want her to die because I have better uses for her, but I will kill her if I have to, so get off your horses and let us end this once and for all, you haggis-munching bastards!" Logan dismounted from Maggie and looked grimly at the soldier holding Rosina, a thin, pasty-faced, sandy-haired type. He folded his arms.

"Tell me something," he said casually, "what makes a man desert? Don't you believe in fighting for your country? You didn't actually think we 'haggis-munching bastards' could beat you, do you? Well done. You beat us, and now the fight is over."

The man looked at him with loathing in his eyes.

"I didn't want to come here, I was ordered," he said heavily, "now the war is over and I have been ordered to stay, I know not why. I have a family, and I want to see them again, as do all of us. But we need money and horses. And a bit of comfort."

Logan could see that the man's arm was beginning to tremble. Just a few more moments and he would be unable to hold up his heavy sword.

"And you think that kidnapping and raping a defenseless woman is 'a bit of comfort?' Let her go. I promise you, you will regret trying to do anything to her. She has powerful friends who will not rest until they find you, and they will show you no mercy. Your friends are wounded and cannot help you."

The arm was shaking now. He could not support it with his other hand because his arm was clamped firmly around Rosina's waist, holding her in place. If he tried to switch hands he would be defenseless just long enough for Logan to pull him off the horse and kill him. They had disarmed Logan, but the English weapons were lying scattered

everywhere. None of the soldier's companions could come to his aid. They were lightly wounded, but unable to move. Logan just had to keep on talking.

*R*osina had been working the knife out of the folds of her skirt.

She was terrified but determined to defend herself. She had little room to maneuver, she knew, but if she stabbed hard enough maybe she could startle him into dropping the sword. It was her only choice.

"If you let her go I will let you go to take your chances in the forest," Logan said reasonably, "I give you my word of honor. Don't be a fool. This is your only chance."

The man looked at him for a moment then dropped the sword. Rosina, who had been about to strike, slumped forward, trembling with relief. Logan hauled the deserter off the horse and pushed the man's hand upward so that his arm was painfully twisted at the elbow. He screamed.

"What is your name?" Rosina asked as they passed her.

"Edward," he replied, his voice cracking.

"Well, Edward," she replied, "I will pray for you."

"Thank you, my Lady," he was pathetically grateful, "I'm sorry for what I did. I was mad."

Rosina said nothing but walked away on trembling legs. 'I will pray for you to go to hell,' she thought viciously.

*T*he three other men had been bound to a tree with the rope that Malcolm always kept with him for emergencies. Sometimes it was necessary to tie horses up to work on their feet.

"I thought you were going to let us go!" Edward said, aghast, "you

gave us your word of honor!"

Logan slapped him on each side of his face with the front and back of his right hand. He wore a great silver ring with a large Cairngorm stone on that hand and it made a dent on the soldier's cheek which would later turn into a great purple bruise. His blue eyes, looking into Edward's brown ones, were dark with fury.

"You dare talk to me about honor!" he growled. "Was it honorable to stop peaceful travelers in the middle of nowhere and try to rob them? Was it honorable to hold a sword to a lady's throat? Was it honorable to take her away and use her the way you wanted to?" he spat in the man's face. "Yes, I gave my word of honor, but honor works both ways, my friend. I lied to save a friend's life, which seems honorable to me, and I would do it again!"

Then he and Malcolm bound his hands and tied him to the tree with the others. Rosina rushed into Logan's arms and he tightened them around her. He was warm, hard, solid and comforting and she felt the reassuring steady beat of his heart as she leaned against his chest. She had nothing to say. She just wanted to stand there in the shelter of his arms, breathe in his scent, and feel safe. He was her haven, her home, her safe harbor - oh, how much she loved him!

Presently he drew back a little to look into her face.

"Are you all right, Rosie?" he asked softly. She nodded.

"I am now," she replied, "Logan, you were magnificent!"

"Thank you, Rosie," he said softly and kissed her gently.

Logan intended to dispatch Malcolm to go and get a few men to bring the prisoners to the castle in an ox cart.

"Go with him please," he ordered. She bristled.

"Are you staying here?" she demanded.

"I am," he said firmly, "someone needs to guard these bags of filth. I don't want you here - it might not be safe."

"I am staying."

He crossed his arms and shook his head.

Rosina sighed.

"Logan, you know my stubbornness is the stuff of legend," she stated firmly. "I said I am staying, and I am."

Logan said no more, but there was a dangerous glint in his eyes. Before she could protest, he picked her up then slung her over his shoulder. He deposited her unceremoniously on her horse before smacking its rump firmly and walking away, not looking back. Rosina squealed indignantly, but she was already being carried away. Malcolm and Maisie grinned at each other as they followed her. For the first time in her life, Rosina Buchanan had been bested.

Fort Augustus

When the three travelers got to the castle it was deep twilight and the winding path up the hill had had to be negotiated very slowly. A few times one of the horses slipped, but at last, they came to it and looked up at its imposing bulk rising high into the blackening sky. Down below, the waters of Loch Ness were still glimmering faintly, but in a few minutes the last tired remains of the sunlit day would be gone and it would be painted a dark gray. Logan had had no means of writing a note but instead had taken off the great ring he wore on his right hand and given it to Rosina.

"Keep it safe," he instructed, "for it was my mother's. If you give it to the estate manager he will recognize it and give you admittance. His name is Findlay Baxter and he is quite short, but you will recognize him by the eye patch he wears."

Now Rosina rode up to the guard and greeted him. He spoke only Gaelic, which both the ladies spoke fluently. He could see by Rosina's expensive clothes and the quality of her horse that she was a lady, so when she addressed him he stood to attention till she gave him permission to relax.

"I wish to see the estate manager, Mr. Findlay Baxter, please," she began, "I have a message for him from Laird Fraser."

"Aye, my Lady," he bowed as he addressed her. "Who shall I tell him is calling upon him?"

"Lady Rosina Buchanan of Dumbarton."

The man went to the big main gate and disappeared inside, then came back outside with the man Logan had described.

"My Lady," he bowed, "please enter and welcome."

"Thank you, Mr. Baxter," Rosina dismounted, but held onto her horse's reins, she opened her hand to reveal the ring, and Findlay Baxter nodded,

"Aye, 'tis his," he looked at her keenly from his one brown eye, "where is he?"

"Laird Fraser was accompanying us, but we ran into trouble on the road." She briefly explained what had happened and Findlay Baxter's face reddened with anger.

"The war is long over," he growled, "but these English -" he stopped himself from uttering an epithet, "just hang about here making trouble! So you say the laird is still there? We cannot leave him alone. I will send some armed men down to stay with him until morning then we can send some transport for them. I think the Laird will want to hand them over to the English garrison in Inverness, but we shall see."

*M*alcolm stepped up at that point.

"May I go wi' them?" he asked. Rosina smiled and nodded.

"Away and get somethin' to eat, man," Findlay said kindly. His one eye followed Malcolm as he walked away, "salt of the earth, men like that," he said warmly, "be fair with them and be fair with you - they work mighty hard."

"You're right, Mr. Baxter, and Malcolm is one of the best!"

*F*indlay clapped his hands.

"Right, my Lady - Miss," he nodded to Maisie, "are you hungry?"

"I am more worried than anything else, Mr Baxter, but I think we should both eat," Rosina replied.

Findlay smiled. He called a servant and ordered some food from the kitchen.

"Whatever you have, Johnny! The ladies are hungry!"

"*W*ould you rather see a bedchamber first or eat?" he asked them.

"I think we would like to wash and change, Mr. Baxter," Rosina replied. Findlay called Mrs McCutcheon, the housekeeper, who showed Rosina to a large room overlooking the Loch, with a smaller anteroom for Maisie.

"*H*ere you are my Lady!" she said cheerfully, "this room is always kept spick and span for very special guests!"

Rosina noticed that her accent belonged to the North of England, and she frowned in puzzlement.

"Where are you from, Mrs McCutcheon?" she asked curiously.

*T*he woman blushed. She was middle-aged but plump, fair and pretty.

"From Manchester, my Lady," she replied, "but I fell in love and married a Scotsman."

Rosina laughed.

"Love is truly blind, Mrs McCutcheon!" she replied, "she doesn't care if you're dark or fair, male or female, dog or cat!"

Mary McCutcheon laughed. She liked this woman already.

"How did Mr. Baxter lose his eye, Mrs McCutcheon?" Maisie asked, "in battle?"

The housekeeper laughed.

"No Miss," she replied, "nothing so heroic. He was playing a game of cards and one of the other players was a sore loser. He was drunk and put a broken bottle in it. He is still serving a ten-year jail sentence."

"Doesn't seem to slow Mr Baxter down, though," Rosina observed. She was watching Maisie as she hung up her clothes. There was something in her face that had not been there before. Her next words confirmed Rosina's suspicions.

"What a shame," she said casually, "he must have been quite handsome."

Rosina and Mrs McCutcheon exchanged glances.

"He's not married," Mary said blithely, "not because of his eye, but because no sensible woman will have him!"

"Why not?" Maisie asked, "what's wrong with him?"

Mrs. McCutcheon sighed.

"He never stops working! Day and night! The staff says that the only time he will lie down to sleep will be when they put him in his coffin!" Rosina flapped a hand at her, laughing.

"He just hasn't found the right woman yet!"

It was a giggling threesome who descended the stairs a while later, where a butler showed Maisie and Rosina the way to the dining room. Mrs McCutcheon waited a while longer till Findlay Baxter came in, then bade them goodnight. Maisie got up to go - as a lady's maid her status was not quite high enough to dine with the present company - but Rosina detained her with a hand on her arm.

"*You* are quite worthy and welcome to sit with me, Maisie," she said sternly, "isn't she, Mr Baxter?"

"*I*ndeed," he replied, smiling. He had just been thinking how much he was going to enjoy having Maisie sitting at the table with him, "I insist on it. It's not often I get to share my lonely table with two beautiful ladies."

Maisie was attracted to Findlay Baxter instinctively as soon as she saw him, and unbeknownst to her, the feeling was mutual. Rosina could feel it in the air between them but said nothing that would embarrass them. She kept up a flow of light chatter all through the soup course and the main course with Maisie putting in a word here and there, but when dessert came in the form of shortbread and coffee, Maisie's eyes lit up.

"*I* am sorry Cook did not prepare something richer," Findlay apologized, "but she had no time."

"*P*lease do not worry, Mr Baxter," she said rapturously, "I would walk a million miles for coffee!"

*F*indlay laughed, then leaned over and patted her hand. His one eye widened.

"I hear it is the taste of the gods!" he said laughingly.

'My god, how lovely you are,' he thought. He had always loved dark beauties with brown eyes and olive skin. Rosina, although she was a very attractive woman, was fair, and did nothing for him. But Maisie was intelligent, funny, beautiful, and was the first woman who had delighted him in a long while.

Logan arrived a while later looking almost as bedraggled as his prisoners. He was tired, dirty and looked very depressed. Rosina rushed to him the moment he came in.

"I was so worried," she looked up into his face and kissed him, and he laid his cheek on top of her hair for a moment, then gave her a quick hug.

"I am very glad you weren't there," he said grimly, "they are not good men. They're not men at all."

"My Laird!" Findlay came up to him and held out his hand, "it has been too long! How are you? I hope those beggars did you no harm?"

Logan smiled tiredly.

"It's good to see you too," he patted Findlay on the shoulder, "we will talk tomorrow when I'm rested. Now I must eat!"

"Of course, my Laird, goodnight Milady, miss Maisie," he bowed to all of them, and Maisie's eyes followed him as he walked away.

Logan sat down at the table and began to eat the food he was given as if he had not eaten for a year. She said nothing, but stroked his hair and looked at him lovingly.

"*They* have coffee," she whispered. He smiled, but it was a sad, defeated kind of smile.

"You look terrible," she observed.

"Thank you," he replied, "I am having a bath. Can you come and see me when I'm finished?"

"Of course," she frowned anxiously, "Logan, are you all right?"

He nodded.

"Still a bit shocked, I think," he sighed and put his hands over his face for a second, "today made me realize something very important, and I want - need to talk to you about it."

"Of course," she looked into his bright blue eyes and frowned anxiously, "whatever it is I can face it."

"Do not be too sure, Rosie," he said ominously.

The Lost Letter

Connor stretched out on his bed as soon as he came inside that day. All he wanted to do now was take his boots off and have a nap before dinner, but his mind was too active to rest. The previous day Monique had had a bright, brittle look as if she were trying to look happy without feeling it. There was something false about her, as though she were trying to hide something, but when he asked her she denied that anything was wrong, then wound her arms around him and kissed him. By the time she had finished with him, he had forgotten about his worries, and they ate a quiet dinner together, sitting afterward in contented silence in front of the fire. Now the worry had come back to niggle him again. There was something - something not quite right. Eventually, he gave up. He put on his clothes and took his horse out again. A swift hard ride would blow away the cobwebs and refresh him.

Monique had gone out riding that day too, and when she came in her body was aching with tiredness and stress. She went up to her room and went to undress, sit down and think for a while. She took off her riding habit and went to her bureau to look for Hugh's letter. For some reason she had got it into her mind that he must have put a secret message in there for her - she just could not accept that it was over.

She looked in all of her bureau drawers, in amongst her shoes, her jewelry box, and the pockets of all her coats, dresses and skirts. By this time she was beginning to feel panicky. Where was it? She had no maid, and the door was always locked. She had unlocked it herself when she came in, and she was fairly sure she had put it into one of

her clothes drawers underneath a pile of petticoats, but she had already looked there. It must be somewhere else. Perhaps she had left it lying on top of her dressing table and it had blown away when the room was aired. She sat down on the bed and tried to take deep breaths to calm herself, then she decided to ask Juliette's advice - she was so practical and sensible. She rushed downstairs and into the big sitting room where Juliette usually spent her afternoons. She was relieved beyond measure to see her sister now and fell into her arms as soon as Juliette stood up to greet her.

"What is it?" Juliette asked anxiously.

"Hugh - Hugh's letter to me - it's gone!" she cried and burst into tears. Juliette held her in her arms and tried to calm her.

"Shhh..." she said, as though she were talking to a small child, "we will find it." She poured Monique a glass of whiskey with water in it to calm her down a little, then they went upstairs to Monique's room again to search. They looked everywhere, even under the carpets. They shook out Monique's books, her clothing and even looked in her jewelry box. Only one thing was missing - an expensive sapphire and diamond necklace that Connor had given her. But the box was always securely locked and kept at the bottom of her bureau, which was also locked. She had the only key - well, except for Connor, and he was hardly likely to steal it! After their exhaustive search, they looked at each other helplessly. They could do no more.

"Did you burn the letter - maybe without thinking?" Juliette suggested. It was wildly improbable, but it was the only thing she could think of. But Monique was really beginning to panic.

"What about my necklace?" she asked hysterically. "Connor will be furious! How can I tell him?"

Juliette took her hands.

"Who is the chambermaid for this room?" Juliette asked, "and does she have a key?"

"She does," Monique was beginning to feel hopeful, "do you think she stole it?"

"It was of no use to anyone," Juliette pointed out, "but let us see what she has to say, hmm?"

Accordingly, the maid was summoned. Kirsty, who was a short, plump, carrot-haired girl was trembling with fear. She curtsied and kept her eyes on the floor as Juliette, who was by far the calmer of the two sisters, addressed her soberly.

"Kirsty," she said gently, "we have a problem I hope you can help us with."

"I will if I can, Madam."

"My sister has lost a very personal letter," she began, "and since you clean this room, we wondered if you had seen it. It is of no value at all to anyone else, and my sister treasures it for sentimental reasons."

Kirsty's brow furrowed in thought.

"Aye, Madam, I saw it yesterday," she replied brightly, and pointed to the brightly glowing fire, "it wis over there, behind the wee statue on the mantelpiece. I mind because it wis very windy and I closed the casement in case the paper should blow intae the fire," she paused and thought. "Aye, an' then I thought I should move it in case it fell in onyway, so I pit it under yon wee vase on the bureau."

*M*onique leaned over to whisper in Juliette's ear.

"What about the necklace?"

Juliette put up a hand to silence her. She obviously had another plan.

"Did you leave the door open when you left or did you lock it?" she asked. Kirsty frowned.

"It wis a funny thing, Madam, I unlocked when I came in," her tone was puzzled, "and left the key in the door, bit when I came oot it wisnae there. I looked everywhere, went back to my work, and

eventually, I told Mrs Morrison."

The girl was so transparently telling the truth that Juliette let her go after thanking her for her co-operation. Then she stood up decisively,

"I am going to speak to Mrs Morrison, the housekeeper," she said firmly, "something else is going on here."

When they spoke to Mrs Morrison, it was in the big front sitting room which the staff usually called 'Juliette's Room,' since she spent so much time there.

"Mrs Morrison," Monique began hesitantly, "this is a very delicate matter, and I rely on your utmost confidentiality."

"Of course, Madam," she replied, frowning, "you can rely on me," she had a rather upper-class Lowlands accent and her speech was quite unlike the local people.

"A very personal and sentimental letter has gone missing from my room," Monique went on, "I asked Kirsty, the chambermaid, and she said that the last time she saw it was yesterday, a very windy day, and she closed the windows to keep the wind out, since the letter was on the mantelpiece and may have blown in the fire. She put it on my bureau. We - " she indicated Juliette, "looked everywhere, but we cannot find it."

"Kirsty told me about it, but when we went to look for it we started upstairs and looked around up there, but when we came down to my room it was back here on the hook." Mrs. Morrison said, "we thought that Kirsty had just dropped it and been unable to find it, and

someone else had locked the door and returned it. Have you lost anything else?"

The two sisters looked at each other for a split second, then Monique spoke to Julia in French.

"What shall we do? Shall we tell her?"

Juliette thought for a moment then nodded.

"One more thing has gone missing," she said heavily, "a priceless diamond and sapphire necklace that the Laird gave to my sister. It was in a locked box in a locked drawer, and nothing has been broken into."

"I keep the key with me at all times," Monique put in, "so I do not understand how this has happened."

"Tell me," the housekeeper asked, "you used to have a maid called Agnes, did you not?"

"Yes, but I disliked and distrusted her, so I dismissed her and did not replace her."

"Why did you dislike her?" She asked.

"Because several times when I came back to my room my clothes had been moved," she replied, "and one day I came in here and she was trying on one of my dresses. It was too small for her - it might have been funny if it were not so serious. I got rid of her at once. Do you think it was her?"

"I don't think she'd be clever enough to get into a locked jewelry box, no. Did she know where it was?"

"No. I put my own jewelry on, but it was mainly costume jewelry anyway."

There was silence for a moment.

"There is only one thing to do," Mrs Morrison stood up. She was rather

a large woman with a big bust, iron gray hair and gimlet blue eyes that missed nothing, "we should call the Laird and ask his advice, then arrange a meeting with all the staff in the big hall. In the meantime, with your permission, Madams, I will interview the maid. Cooler heads may prevail if you are not there."

"*Very* wise, Mrs. Morrison," Juliette said, smiling at her. "I trust you have your own methods of getting her to keep her mouth shut?"

"*I* do, Madam," Mrs. Morrison replied grimly, "don't worry about that!"

Connor's Discovery

Mrs Morrison reported back quickly to the two sisters. She sent one of the housemaids to bring them downstairs then showed them into her own parlor-cum-office. There they saw a very tearful and shamefaced Agnes standing with her hands folded in front of her and her gaze pinned to the wall in front of her, avoiding everyone's eyes.

Monique took a seat but Juliette stayed standing. She was taller than Monique, especially with her hair piled high, as it was now, and she made a commanding figure.

"I have interviewed her, Madam," the housekeeper said heavily, "and she admitted what she has done, but I think she is truly sorry."

"And what possible use could such a letter be to you?" Juliette asked scornfully, "can you even read?"

Agnes's demeanor changed in the blink of an eye. She glared at Juliette with a look that was full of hatred. Her dark eyes were black with it.

"Aye, Mistress, I can read!" she spat, "well enough tae know what you -" she pointed an accusing finger at Monique, "hae been daein' wi' the Laird o' Dumbarton!" Out of the corner of her eye, Monique saw Mrs Morrison start as if she had been stung by a bee. "An' whit dae ye know of never haein' ony fine claes, only the worn-oot anes o' yer cousin who got them fae anither before them? How wid you like tae go tae bed wi' an empty belly? I worked my way up fae bein' a scullery maid tae a lady's maid an' then you came an' took it a' awa'! A' I wanted wis a wee dream, an' noo I'm back tae bein' a scullery maid again! For shame, Madam! For shame!"

"*And* where is the letter now?" Juliette demanded, "did you destroy it?"

Agnes's dark face took on a look of sly triumph.

"Oh, no," she said in a low, malicious voice, "I threw it into yer husband's bedroom while he wis asleep. If ye're quick ye might just get yer hauns on it afore he wakes."

Monique was so shocked that she staggered backward and hit the wall with her back, but Juliette was made of sterner stuff. She grabbed her sister's hand then they ran as fast as their legs would carry them along the miles of corridor to Connor's bedroom. Monique stood outside the door for a moment recovering her breath and trying to calm herself.

"Be brave," Juliette encouraged, kissing her forehead. Monique knocked the door but there was no answer. As soon as she went in she could see that it was too late. Connor was sitting with her letter dangling from his hand. He had been out riding, she could see by his clothes, but he had been back for some time. His expression was one of pure rage, but there were tears streaming down his cheeks. He said only one word:

"Why?"

She sat down on the bed and sighed.

"Connor - I do not know," she said sadly, "it just happened. We looked at each other and - it was instant," she shrugged, "we just couldn't help it. I know that I am ungrateful, I know that I am treacherous, and I have done a very bad thing to a very good man who truly loves me. I would never have had this happen for the world, Connor, believe me. As you can see by the letter, we had called everything off, and I would have married you and tried to forget about him."

She felt as if she had stabbed him as he gazed at her with so much heartbreak in his eyes. He was angry because he had a broken heart, and he did not deserve this.

She put her hand on top of his but he snatched it away at once, and she could not blame him.

"What did he give you that I didn't, Monique?" Connor asked angrily, "I was doing the honorable thing and keeping my distance until our wedding night! He obviously had no such scruples - and neither did you! Was he a fabulous lover? Did you enjoy it?"

He glared at her then turned away as if too disgusted to look at her.

"I am unworthy of you," she whispered, "and - there is one more thing," she looked up at him with absolute dread in her heart, "Connor - someone has stolen my necklace!" She closed her eyes, waiting for him to raise his voice, and she wished he would. She wanted to be reprimanded for her guilt. It was the only way she could handle it.

"This necklace?" he held it up by his forefinger then dropped it into her lap, "I took it before you came back because I don't think you deserve it."

She nodded slowly in agreement.

"You are right," she agreed, "I cannot stay here, obviously," she said, passing her hand in front of her eyes, which were stinging with stress, "but can we stay a few more days till I find us somewhere else to live?"

"What makes you think I would even consider such a thing after what you've done to me?" he rounded on her, his face a mask of fury, "do you not think that even now the servants' grapevine is spreading this news far and wide? Soon everyone from here to Glasgow will know and I will be a laughing stock!"

Monique could think of nothing to say. Her hands were clasped tightly in her lap, but presently she stood up and wiped her eyes. She took the necklace from her lap and laid it on his bedside table. He immediately snatched it up and pressed it into her hand.

"Keep it," he growled, "you will get quite a few pounds for it if you sell it in Glasgow, and you may need the money, for you are not getting a penny from me."

Monique wavered for a moment. Her pride wanted to throw the necklace back at him, but common sense told her that there was truth in his words, and she could not eat pride. She closed her hand around the necklace and held it tightly, pressing it to her heart.

"You have one week," he said angrily, "and during that time, you, your sister and her two brats will keep to your rooms for meals and all other activities. If you need to go out, use the servants' staircase. Do you understand?"

At last her anger rose to meet his own.

"I may be unworthy, Connor, but I am not stupid and I speak excellent English. Do you speak French?"

"Do you speak Gaelic?" Connor put his hands up to call a halt, realizing just how stupid the tit-for-tat argument sounded.

"Connor," Monique stepped up close to him, "please believe me that I never meant to hurt you. I would have married you and been a faithful wife, I have no excuse for what I did and I hope that in time you will be able to forgive me."

He looked closely at her, her fair, almost white hair and warm brown eyes. He gazed at her red, cupid-bow lips that he had kissed so often and wanted to kiss forever more. How he hated her - and how he loved her!

Battle of Words

Monique's energy seemed to have drained out of her when she rejoined her sister.

"It's what we expected," she said heavily, "he has thrown us out. We have a week to pack and go."

"Go where?" Juliette asked. There was panic in her voice, which scared Monique. Her sister had always been so strong and capable, but now she was clearly frightened for herself, but especially for her children.

They walked slowly back to the parlor, where the boys had now settled and were quietly playing a game of checkers. Juliette looked at them and the love in her heart was almost a physical pain. How could she let them become homeless? In ten days' time, it would be Christmas, but there would be no cheer this year unless there was a miracle. She began to weep silently and surreptitiously wiped her face so that the twins would not notice, but they were too engrossed in their game.

"*Bonjour*, Maman," they chorused, "Hello Mommy," they greeted her briefly.

"*Bonjour*, mes enfants," she replied, "Hello, my children."

Then they went back to their game.

"Do you think -" Monique began.

"Hugh?" Juliette supplied hopefully.

Monique thought for a moment.

"He loves the boys," she said thoughtfully, "and he loves me. He knows about my problem, though."

"You think he may not want you anymore?" Juliette asked anxiously.

*M*onique nodded sadly.

"But he is our only hope."

Juliette looked out of the window. It had begun to snow, and the flakes were settling on the ground without melting. In a day or so it would be a foot deep. She bit her lip and sighed.

"Surely Connor would not throw us out in the snow?" she asked incredulously.

"I would not be too sure, but I am unwilling to take the chance," Monique frowned and looked out into the garden. It was too dark to ride to Dumbarton Castle now, but she resolved to do it first thing in the morning. They had dinner in Monique's bedroom, then went to bed, but none of them slept that night except the boys, who slept the sleep of the just.

When Connor got up next morning he had a splitting headache caused by the five glasses of whiskey he had drunk before he went to bed. He was still tired, his eyes were red and itchy, his skin was blotchy and he was very, very angry. He rubbed his eyes hard and saw spots for a moment, then he flopped back down on his bed.

He finished the glass of whiskey that he had left beside the bed when he had passed out the previous night and felt a little better. But he was still furious and felt like riding straight down to Dumbarton Castle and confronting Hugh. He stood for a moment, irresolute, then decided to do just that. He did not wash, shave or put on clean clothes, but went out in the ones he'd had on when he lapsed into unconsciousness the night before. He saddled his horse and tore out of

the castle as though a horde of demons were chasing him.

The snow had acquired a thick crust overnight but his anger was blinding him to any danger, and Connor was on a mission which nothing was going to stop him from fulfilling. He came to the castle gates without mishap, however, and the guards at the gate who knew him by sight admitted him without any fuss. As soon as he was inside the walls he demanded to see the Laird, barely able to contain his fury.

Hugh guessed at once what had happened, and steeled himself for the coming encounter. Connor was pacing the entrance hall just inside the front door, his face a mask of fury. He looked up when he heard Hugh's footsteps and it darkened even further.

"You treacherous swine!" he shouted, holding up Monique's letter, "you knew she was promised to me!"

"Guilty as charged on both counts," Hugh said evenly, "but Monique is as guilty as I am, and I am sure she will agree with me. What we did was not honorable, but she broke off our affair so that she could be true to you."

"Because she told you so?" Connor's voice was incredulous, "because she wrote a letter? Have you not yet learned how devious she is, man? Do you know how many believable excuses she made so that she could go to you? How carefully she chose her time? "

Hugh wondered if she had told him about her infertility, but decided to say nothing. He himself was beginning to rage inside, but he had decided to let Connor work the fury out of his system, so he stood immobile while Connor walked up and down calling him every foul epithet he could think of. Eventually, he came to a halt and stood in front of Hugh, his eyes blazing.

"You will never, ever be accepted in polite society again!" he spat, "and I will make sure that no-one trades with you either. Your household knows and soon my household will know. There is going to

be a scandal bigger than any you have ever known before."

"I think my reputation is such that it can withstand the scandal," Hugh replied calmly, "and even if it is not, those who will despise me are not worth knowing anyway. Monique is your fiancée, not your wife, Connor. She has not, in truth been unfaithful to you."

Connor took a deep breath and let it out slowly to control himself.

"I take pleasure in the fact that my whore of a fiancée is not going to be in living under my roof come Friday," he growled, "and after that,

All she, her goods, chattels and leeching relatives will be living in the forest! Good day to you, Laird Buchanan."

Connor spun on his heel and left without allowing Hugh to say another word. He was angry at Connor's words but elated that Monique was free, and she would not be living in the forest, but with him.

Monique had watched Connor storming out of the castle and knew immediately where he had gone. She took a bath which was filled for her by two very sullen servants, then got dressed and put on her old brown riding habit. She ate as much of her breakfast as she could stomach and then waited.

An hour later Connor came back and went straight to his office, demanding that his breakfast be sent there. Monique waited till the coast was clear then began the journey to Hugh's house. It was a distance of only two miles but took her an hour because unlike Hugh she was careful in the treacherous conditions. It had begun to snow again by the time she got there, and she was freezing, despite her warm cloak.

Sanctuary

As soon as he heard her footsteps in the echoing hallway Hugh came out to meet her and opened his arms so that she could run into them. They stood embracing each other for a moment while Hugh closed his eyes and buried his face in the soft scented mass of her hair.

"You are an icicle!" he laughed, and they went into his office where a huge fire was burning in the grate. Hugh pulled up a chair for her as close to the blaze as he could, and she sat for a moment warming her hands.

"He was here, was he not? Connor?"

Hugh nodded.

"Yes," he took her hand in both of his and kissed them. "He said you would be homeless come Friday, but you will never be homeless as long as I am here to protect you. You, Juliette and the boys have a home here for as long as you want it."

"Oh, Hugh! Thank you!" she burst into tears and he sat down and pulled her onto his lap. He kissed her through her tears and said softly:

"Will you be my wife, Monique?"

She nodded, unable to speak because she was laughing and crying at the same time. This morning she had been miserable, but now her whole world had changed - and she would be with Hugh forever. Then she remembered something.

"But Hugh - I cannot give you children," she said anxiously, "no sons."

He shrugged.

"I have a daughter who will no doubt give me grandchildren," he pointed out "and in the meantime, I have your nephews who will definitely give me enough trouble to be getting on with! It is more than a lot of men have and I am satisfied, Monique."

She hugged him as if she would never let him go.

"Merci, mon chère, merci," she breathed, "thank you, my dear, thank you."

They sat quietly for a while then she said:

"This will cause a terrible scandal, mon chère. We will never be received in polite society again."

"Exactly what Connor said," Hugh's tone was nonchalant, "my true friends will stand by me, and the rest- well, they were not friends anyway."

Monique thought for a moment.

"So you would give up your friends, the chance of another child, and adopt a family you hardly know? For me?"

"For you," he answered, smiling, "but you in return must take care of me. You must be a very good wife - day and night!" his eyes twinkled as he said it, and she laughed. Then she sighed sadly.

"I must go," she said regretfully, "I need to pack."

"I will send a carriage for you in two hours," he looked at his pocket watch, "is that enough time?"

"We have very little to pack," she smiled, "Oh, mon chère, it will be wonderful!"

"We are going to have the merriest Christmas ever," Hugh said, smiling grimly, "Rosina will be back in a few days and that always means mayhem!"

Monique giggled.

"I can't wait!" she said happily. Hugh watched her as she mounted her horse and rode away into the snow. It was even colder now, but Monique had her love to keep her warm.

Juliette was ecstatic. As soon as she heard the news she began to pack their trunks, and within an hour all their possessions were safely stowed away. Monique looked at the diamond and sapphire necklace and debated whether to keep it or give it back. Juliette shook her head.

"Sell it," she advised, "and give the money to a worthy cause, perhaps an orphanage or something. God knows, there are plenty of worthy causes around here!"

"I knew you would know the answer," Monique said fondly, hugging her sister, "you always do. How could I live without you?"

"I think you exaggerate, Monique!" Juliette laughed.

"Come on, let's go and wait for the carriage, my sweet sister," Monique said happily, then, arms around each other, they went downstairs.

The boys were waiting impatiently, playing hide and seek around the little alcoves in the big hall, when Connor came up to them.

"Going so soon?" his tone was so sarcastic that Juliette felt like slapping him. On an impulse, Monique took the necklace out of her purse and offered it to him.

"It's yours - it was a gift - keep it," he said flatly. "I don't want it. Sell it, pawn it, give it away, I don't care. I take it you are going to live with Hugh?"

Monique nodded.

"Forever?"

"Till death do us part," she quoted from the marriage ceremony, her eyes never leaving his.

"You bitch," he ground out viciously, "you will pay for this - I don't know how or when but you will!"

Then he turned and almost sprinted away. Monique was white with shock and her heart was hammering - she had never seen such hate in anyone's face before. Just then the carriage arrived and as they climbed up Juliette could see Connor's face looking down at them from a rampart. Truly, she thought, if looks could kill we would all be dead.

When they got to Dumbarton Castle the first thing the two boys did was run to Uncle Hugh and hug him, laughing. He picked both of them up and once and kissed them, then put them down again.

"Will you teach me French?" he asked, "please?"

"Oui, bien sûr," they chorused, "yes, of course."

Hugh bent down and said quietly as if trying not to be overheard:

"*I* know where to get hot chocolate!"

The boys jumped up and down squealing for directions, then Hugh called a servant and told her to take the boys to the kitchen. They watched them go with not a care in their world, their one aim in life to get a cup of cocoa.

"Boys!" Hugh said, laughing, "Juliette! You look lovely. How are you?" he bowed and kissed her hand.

"I am fine - now kiss your sweetheart while I find these children of mine!" Ever tactful, she hurried away.

"Your sister always knows the right thing to do," Hugh said huskily, "god, Monique, I can't stay away from you. You're driving me mad."

Then he kissed her passionately, crushing her lips against his. When she broke away his mouth traveled to her neck, then his hand found

her breast and she heard herself moaning. By mutual consent, they went upstairs to his room and fell onto his big bed, then made love as if it were the last time ever. There was no finesse, no tenderness, but afterward, Monique still felt cherished and protected. She knew now with absolute certainty that she would have left Connor even if he had not told her to, even if she'd had to leave him at the altar because it was her destiny to be with Hugh.

"*I* think we'd better go before we're missed," she said reluctantly.

Hugh groaned.

"Do we have to?" he asked in a pained tone, "I would much rather stay here."

"So would I," she laughed, "but the boys will be wondering where you are. They love you already, Hugh."

"I love them too," he replied, "I hadn't realized how empty this big place was. It's going to be amazing to hear the sound of children's laughter again."

"Would you like to hang up some decorations tomorrow?" Hugh asked after dinner. The boys cheered. They were standing in their nightshirts about to go to bed and they looked like little angels.

"They want to sleep in their new room but you must put them to bed, Uncle Hugh!" Juliette announced, laughing. She caught his hand as he stood up.

"Thank you for everything," she whispered, "I don't know what we would have done -"

"Relax, Juliette," he smiled and kissed her forehead, "I am the fortunate one. I got a new family and a new love for Christmas. I am indeed blessed!"

Logan's Story

Logan's apartments were, as Rosina had expected, rather Spartan.

There were a few threadbare rugs on the floor, some small tables and a couple of armchairs with a couch facing the fireplace, which had not yet been laid. Logan called the kitchen maid to prepare it and light it while he drew back the faded curtains and released a storm of dust. They had obviously not been cleaned for years. The paintings on the wall were old, the canvases cracked and dirty. They too had been neglected, except for the one above the fireplace, which portrayed a dark man sitting on a great black horse. His features bore a striking similarity to Logan's the only difference being that he had hazel eyes instead of Logan's brilliant blue ones.

"I have no need to ask who this is," Rosina remarked, "the likeness is very marked!"

"We were very alike," he said, smiling fondly, "except that he was a good man."

He left out the obvious conclusion 'and I am not.' Rosina ignored it.

"And your mother?"

"Died in childbirth, like so many other women." His voice was not sad or bitter. After all, he had never known her.

"I'm sorry," she said sympathetically.

Rosina walked around the room, thinking how beautiful it could be if someone just took care of it. How she would love to hang beautiful curtains and have some new floral and landscape paintings commissioned. The room was bare of ornaments and it would have given her great pleasure to choose some. When the fire had been glowing for a while she sat down on one of the chairs.

Logan had ordered some tea and scones, and after he had poured them each a cup, he looked into the fire for a while before speaking.

"I have never told a single soul what I am about to tell you, Rosie," he took a sip of his tea, put the cup down, and turned to her. "If you want to go I will understand, but please let me finish first."

She nodded.

"Of course Logan," she said, "Go on."

"Thank you. This is very difficult," he began, "as you see, I cannot control myself around liquor, which is why I do not drink it. I am ashamed of this weakness of mine, but there is a reason for it," he paused again, gathering his thoughts.

"After the night when I made such a fool of myself, it took me a while to recover my senses. The craving comes back, you see. Once I get a taste of it, it becomes very hard to say no again, and I want you to understand that. It was my fault, to begin with, and now I am paying for it," he had another sip of his tea then went on: "when - when I was but sixteen years old, I had a love affair with an older woman - well, not old exactly. She was twenty-six. She seduced me, but I was ready to be seduced at that age!"

He gave a dry, humorless laugh, "we had a long relationship - over a year, and what had started as a bit of fun became true love, at least for me. I was young and vigorous - she loved my energy and stamina - and I thought that she felt the same way I did. I told her one day that I loved her, and that was when she told me she was married. Her husband was away a lot - he was a merchant - and she was lonely. He suffered from melancholia too, and she said that sometimes he paid no attention to her for weeks at a time. At seventeen I didn't care. I wanted her every day I could have her - she became an obsession."

He rubbed his eyes and she could see that there were tears leaking from between his fingers. She felt desperately sorry for him - this was

a man in agony.

"One night - strangely enough, the first time the first time I ever tasted whiskey - we were in bed together, and her husband came in," he shook his head and gave a great sigh, "I will never forget the look on his face. I thought he would be angry, but instead he looked pitifully sad," he put his head in his hands, "Rosina - I can't do this," he whispered.

She knelt down in front of him and took his hands from his face then held them gently in hers. They were freezing.

"Go on, I'm listening," she gave him a small smile of encouragement.

"He said: 'Oh, my darlin', you have broken my heart.' Then before either of us could stop him he shot himself in the stomach. There was so much blood!" He emptied his tea cup and took a deep breath.

"She recovered her wits quickly," he went on, "she did not want him to be buried in an unconsecrated grave so she made it look as if an intruder broke in and he was murdered. She told me to run, and I did. I went back to the castle and my father packed me off down to the Lowlands to be trained to run the estate down there. For a few weeks, I was insensible with drink."

He stopped again and she waited, wiping tears from his face with her handkerchief.

"I couldn't forget the look on his face, the words he said," he shook his head, "and all that blood. I had to numb the pain."

"And your lover?" Rosina asked.

"Loretta?" He squeezed his eyes shut as if to shut out some dreadful sight, "I never saw her again, and I have not lain with another woman since" he looked at her with the ghost of a smile and resumed his story.

"After a while, I made the hardest decision of my life," he said grimly, "one night I fell off my horse and injured my leg very badly - I was lucky not to bleed to death. I ordered every alcoholic drink out of the castle and had every room searched to make sure it was all gone. I had just employed Malcolm then, and he was a pillar of strength, although he will deny it. I stopped drinking, and except for that one disaster a few days ago when I disgraced myself, I have not touched a drop since. After I was sober I was willing enough and sensible enough to learn to supervise the management of the estate. So when you and Alasdair - it brought back such a lot of torment."

"But why did you never marry?" Rosina asked, puzzled, "you did not kill that man!"

"I didn't shoot him, Rosie, but I might as well have," he said bitterly, "I was the cause of his death. Not a day goes by when I don't think about him," he slapped his fist into his palm with anger, "and Loretta. They might have had children, a long happy life together -"

"And they might not!" she cried desperately, "Logan, you said he had melancholia. I don't know too much about that but I have heard that people suffering from it sometimes harm themselves. We do not know what the future may have held for them. Stop blaming yourself for being young and stupid - we were all the same at that age."

He looked up at her, and for the first time since she had known him, she saw hope in his eyes.

"Do you really think so? You do not think me a monster?" he asked hoarsely. "Rosina, I am a drunk, I am almost incapable of making friends and belonging in normal society. I cannot talk to anyone - except you. I have heard the servants say I am handsome, but that's because they do not know me well."

"Because you will not let them!" She cupped his face in her hands and kissed him hard on the mouth, "You have built an impregnable fortress around yourself, Logan. Nobody can get past your hostility!"

"You did," he said softly, looking deeply into her eyes.

"But I did warn you that I am the most stubborn woman ever born," she laughed, "brick walls do not withstand me."

"You were born for me," his face was full of wonder, "I have just realized it - you are the only one who can heal me, Rosie."

"I know," she whispered, kissing him tenderly. When she drew back, he stood up and pulled her with him then looked down into her eyes for a moment, before kissing her hungrily, pulling her against him and holding her with one hand on her head and the other on her back. For the first time in a long, long while Logan Fraser was truly happy.

"Marry me, Rosina," he whispered into her hair. She giggled.

"I thought you'd never ask," she breathed, "I thought I might end up being a lonely old maid pining away forever among the cobwebs! Logan, you silly man, of course, I will!"

*H*e wrapped his arms around her and lifted her off her feet while she squealed with laughter, and that was how Maisie and Findlay found them as they came walking along the passage toward them. Rosina kissed Logan one last time then saw them.

"Maisie!" she cried, "get your needles and scissors! You are making me a wedding dress!"

Loretta

Logan was so happy he couldn't stop smiling. Maisie clapped her hands and smiled joyfully.

"Mistress - Laird, I am so happy for you!"

Rosina pulled her into a sisterly embrace and whispered:

"Will you be sewing one for yourself too?"

"Maybe!" Maisie whispered back. Rosina looked at her, happily surprised.

"What are you two whispering about?" Logan asked suspiciously.

"Girl talk, Logan," Rosina answered, "trust me - you will not be interested!"

Logan said nothing but smiled indulgently. Maisie put her hands to her cheeks and gasped.

"My Laird!" she said in astonishment, "I don't think I have ever seen you smile like that before!"

Logan threw back his head and laughed.

"Blame Rosie!" he said, hugging her to him and kissing her, "she has ordered me to smile at least twenty times a day!"

"Milady," Findlay said, bowing and kissing her hand, "my congratulations. Is it too early to ask if you have a date set?"

"We have some business to take care of in Dumbarton first, then we will," Logan said matter-of-factly. Rosina's spirits plummeted. She had

forgotten about all that, and for a moment, she felt herself beginning to go back to the dark night of her marriage. Whatever had happened was still plaguing her and Logan, but she would not let it spoil her happiness. That was tomorrow's problem, but now she had Logan all to herself and she knew they would stand by each other forever.

"*N*ow Findlay, Maisie," Rosina said happily, "shall we toast to our marriage in coffee?"

"Mistress!" Maisie said rapturously, "did you bring some with you?"

"I did," Rosina replied, "I was keeping it for a special occasion. I think this is special enough, don't you?"

Downstairs they ordered some of the precious brew and waited to see Findlay's reaction. he took a tentative sip and savored it on his tongue then opened his one eye wide as it went down his throat. It was black, bitter and piping hot but he closed his eye in fervent appreciation.

"That is magnificent!" he said in astonishment, "I have never tasted anything like it!"

"No milk?" Maisie asked doubtfully, "it's very strong."

"I like it this way," he said firmly, "I am not going to spoil it." He swallowed the rest in short order and asked for more.

Findlay laughed, then he put his hand over Maisie's on the table. She smiled shyly at him, then they looked at Logan and Rosina. Logan looked flabbergasted, but Rosina merely raised her eyebrows and gave him a sly sideways look.

"You two -" he asked, frowning, "you didn't say anything, Findlay."

"I don't discuss such matters with the Laird," Findlay replied, grinning.

"But you knew," Logan looked at Rosina, "did Maisie tell you?"

"No," Rosina laughed, "we're women. We understand each other."

Logan was puzzled, then he shrugged.

"So, are you getting wed too?" Logan asked. He was like a bull in a china shop, Rosina thought pityingly. Maisie shook her head and

looked at Findlay, then back at Logan.

"No, my Laird," she said, "we are just getting to know each other. There is plenty of time for that, and we live many miles apart."

"I will never understand women," Logan sighed.

The next few days were magical, and Rosina saw a side of Logan that she had never seen before. The children of the staff members played in the courtyard between the castle walls and the castle itself, and Logan loved to play with them. They built snowmen together and sometimes he read to them. At other times he could be found throwing and kicking a ball, or giving them rides on his shoulders, but they loved it when he told them stories about the legendary monster who lived in Loch Ness. Rosina was enchanted, both by his love of children and by their love of him. He was going to be an excellent father, she thought, and she looked forward to the day when she would give birth to their first child. How perfect their love was!

Logan also loved to play chess. He and Rosina were of equal ability but the games were played in such a light-hearted spirit that nobody cared who won. There were nights spent lying in each others' arms in front of the fire in Logan's parlor, talking dreamily, dozing occasionally and kissing a lot.

*B*ut all too soon it had to end and it was time to pack up and go back to Fort William.

Rosie was concerned about Maisie, who was putting a brave face on things but was obviously reluctant to go. Rosina found her one day gazing out of the window thoughtfully when she should have been working.

"Are you all right, Maisie?" Rosina asked gently. Maisie jumped and turned around. There were tears running down her cheeks and dripping off her chin, and her face was a picture of misery.

"Oh, Maisie!" Rosina ran forward to embrace her and Maisie's tears soaked into the fine linen of her dress.

"Do you want to stay here?" Rosina asked.

Maisie shook her head firmly.

"I could never leave you, Mistress, though I confess I will miss Findlay a great deal. We have talked a lot and we have much in common."

"Could you fall in love with him?" Rosina asked gently.

"I do not know him well enough yet," Maisie answered, "and I do not believe in love at first sight."

"And I think you are lying to yourself," Rosina said dryly. She took her by the shoulders and looked directly into her eyes.

"Tell me you do not love him," she said firmly.

"My place is with you, Mistress," Maisie said firmly, "and I am just feeling sorry for myself."

Rosina shook her head and cast her eyes heavenward. She sat Maisie down on the bed and took her hands in her own.

"Maisie, I love you," she said, firmly, "and that is why I will never sacrifice your happiness for my own. If you would like to stay here and continue your acquaintance with Findlay, then I give you my blessing, not that you need it. I will ask Logan if he can find a place for you in the household and if you do not like it you can come back to me."

"But who will look after you?" Maisie asked anxiously.

Rosina sighed.

"Maisie, I am a grown woman. I can look after myself!" she laughed, but Maisie still looked troubled.

"My sister Una needs a place," she said in a troubled voice, "but she is young and a bit wild."

"Sleep on it," Rosina kissed her forehead, "and give me your answer

tomorrow."

Maisie nodded, smiling sadly. She had never, ever thought of a situation that would make her leave her beloved Rosina till she met Findlay. But what if things did not work out between them? She knew that they liked each other very much, but was that love? She would sleep on it, as Rosina had said.



Logan had decided to go and visit an old friend of his father's before they went away, but Rosina had wanted to spend as much time with Maisie as she could since her companion still had not made up her mind what she wanted to do. Anyway, she reasoned, men's talk was all about hunting, the price of livestock and fishing, so Logan went on his own. When he saw the marketplace he decided to see if he could find a little Christmas present for Rosina. He was looking at a couple of hand-made fur muffs and decided that he liked a fox fur one. He paid for it and began to walk between the other stalls when he saw Loretta.

She was looking directly at him, and in her hazel eyes was a look of what - panic? Yes. Sheer blind terror. He began to walk toward her but she backed away, and he stopped, thinking better of it. Obviously, she did not want to be reminded of their horrific experience either. He gave her an imperceptible nod of understanding, then another figure joined her, a boy of about ten with shining, pitch-black hair. When he saw the direction of his mother's frozen gaze his own followed it, and the eyes looking into Logan's were a brilliant sky blue. Logan stared at him for a moment, taking in every single feature of his son's face. He had the same nose, the same full mouth, and the same high cheekbones as his own. Indeed, there was very little of his mother at all except for her wavy hair and long-fingered, graceful

hands. She turned away quickly and the boy went with her, then they were joined by a tall fair man and a little girl of about six with light reddish hair the same color as Rosina's. The boy seemed not to have noticed anything amiss, but then he was still very young. Loretta took one frightened glance backward before hurrying away.

Maisie's Decision

Logan sat down on a wooden bench because his legs would not hold him up anymore. He had a son. The likeness between him and the boy was so marked as to be astonishing. He forgot about his father's friend and rode home in a daze. When he got to the castle he looked all over for Rosina only to be told that she had gone for a ride with Maisie.

He could not describe how he felt - pride that he had such a beautiful son, regret that he could not see him, sadness that he had missed his childhood, and anger that Loretta had never told him about the boy. But how could she? He had been a wild teenager with no sense of responsibility and even less knowledge of the world. She wondered what she had told him about his father. Probably that his father had died before he was born - that would have been why she hadn't wanted him to see the boy. Her face had been white with fear. It was a few moments before he realized that he was trembling, and his hands were freezing, as they usually were when he became upset or frightened.

He knew that there were decanters of whiskey in the dining room but he would not seek solace there. He could not even remember the things that had happened to him during the unfortunate night of his last escapade!

Just then, he heard Rosina and Maisie in the corridor outside, laughing at something Rosie had said.

"Rosina!" he called. He had no wish to get up and let Maisie see him in such a state, or for her to hear the secret he wanted to tell Rosina

alone.

"Logan!" she called back gaily, "what is it? I'm just going for a bath."

"Come in, please, alone."

Rosina and Maisie looked at each other, then Rosina went in to speak to her fiancé. She took one look at him and sat down beside him, frowning.

"*L*ogan - you look as if you've seen a ghost!" she said, shocked, "What has happened?"

He shook his head and paused as if unable to get the words out.

"I have a son," he said heavily, "I have a son, Rosie." He looked up at her, his eyes full of wonder.

"How do you know?"

"I saw him, with Loretta at the market," he replied, "he looked right at me - and our eyes are exactly the same - and our hair. I only saw him for a few seconds, but I know."

"I wish I could have seen him too," Rosina said quietly.

"She has at least one other child too," he went on, "A little girl of about six, and a husband who looks about as unlike me as is humanly possible!"

"How do you feel?" she asked gently, taking one of her cold hands in her own.

"Strange - sad, happy, regretful - a million different feelings at once," he answered, and sighed, "Oh, Rosie, I wish I had known."

*S*he moved along the couch so that he could lay his head on her lap.

"Think of yourself at seventeen," she urged, "could you have coped with a child and his mother?" He shook his head.

"I knew you'd be wise," he whispered, "It's one of the reasons I love you."

"I love you because you can talk your way out of anything," she laughed, "and because I can tell your feelings by how hot your hands are!"

"I won't see him again," Logan went on. "I am a stranger now and he has a family of his own. I wonder what his name is?"

"Logan, you will probably never meet him again so try not to worry."

Logan sighed.

"You are right, my Rosie," he smiled sadly, "but I hope neither of them suffered because of me. However, it's good to know that I can sire a child and that he's happy."

*R*osina looked down at him, smiling up at her.

"Strange how I always knew your name," she said dreamily, "but I never knew what you were like. Promise me that we will try to have a baby as soon as we get married, Logan. I don't care if it's a girl or a boy, but the story of your son makes me very keen to get with child as soon as I can!"

"*M*e too, my wild Rosie," he laughed, "I think about you every night before I go to sleep and long to have you in my arms. But it will not be long now - after I find out who is besmirching my name in Dumbarton!"

"I don't want to go back," Rosina said sadly, "I love it here. I love my own river too, but it is beautiful here. Why did you not want to sail here?"

"I am not keen on water - I get seasick," he admitted, "but I love the road. I love to be on horseback and I know you ladies do too."

Rosie nodded and Logan closed his eyes.

"Mmmm..." he said contentedly, "may I stay here forever just resting my head in your lap?"

"Then how will we make babies?" Rosina giggled.

Logan frowned and nodded.

"I suppose I shall have to move then," he conceded, "my stomach thinks so anyway. It wants to be fed."

"*Then* let us feed it, Logan Fraser, before you starve to death!" They put their arms around each others' waists and went out.

"Do you not think that Rosina Fraser is a most becoming name?"

"I do."

"Then the faster we change my name the better!" Rosina said excitedly, "We need to make plans as soon as we get back."

"We will not have a big wedding, will we, Rosie?" he looked worried, "I don't like to be the center of attention."

"We can have whatever size you want," she smiled, "whatever makes you happy."

"Maisie!" Rosina called as she went back to her room. Maisie appeared instantly.

When they went inside Rosina asked gently:

"Have you made up your mind?"

"Mistress," she began carefully, "I will go back with you and I will wait and see how I feel in a month or so. There is a postal service now - it is a very new thing - but we can write to each other for a while. Then we will both have time to consider."

Rosina smiled at her.

"Maisie, you `never fail to astonish me," she said admiringly, "you always find a way!"

Annie and Callum

Maisie was somewhat tearful when she said goodbye to Findlay, but he himself tried to be cheerful for her sake, even though his heart was breaking. He had never met anyone like this beautiful, intelligent, funny woman with all her skills and accomplishments. He hoped that their relationship would continue and that she would not forget him till they saw each other again, but he had no illusions about himself. Which woman would want a one-eyed man after she had had time to think about it?

He pressed a small velvet pouch into her hand as they said farewell. She was dismayed.

"But Findlay, I have nothing for you!"

"We do not give to receive," he said warmly, then kissed her on the cheek, "and write to me. I will do the same."

Maisie nodded, then they mounted the horses and began the journey back to Fort William. She did not look back.

The journey was uneventful, and they arrived at Rosina's house in the middle of the afternoon. It was the eighteenth of December, three days before the winter solstice, and darkness was already creeping in. They had managed to get back just in time to avoid the snowstorm which was about to descend on them from the north, but already the first flakes were falling and settling on the frozen ground.

Annie came running out to meet them, and the two women embraced her while Logan and Malcolm put the horses away. There was much laughing, kissing and each one was trying to be heard over the other, so it was a happy bunch who entered the warm fire lit parlor.

Annie set about making tea while the ladies sat down and told her and Callum all about the trip. Rosina wanted to hear all the details about their honeymoon but Annie put her foot down.

"You first, Rosina!" she insisted, "time for us auld folks by and by."

"Oh, Annie," Rosina began, "it was truly wonderful. What a beautiful castle - although the dècor needs a lot of updating!"

When the men came in, Annie noticed that Logan's expression and manner were a lot lighter and more carefree, and it needed none of her psychic powers to tell her why, because he gave it away every time he looked at Rosina.

Annie was alarmed when she heard of the ambush.

"Were ye no' terrible feart?" she asked anxiously, "I wid hae been tremblin' in ma boots!"

"We were," Logan said, his face grim as he remembered it, "they came out of nowhere. They wanted everything we had, even Rosina and Maisie!" he thumped the table with remembered anger and everyone jumped. "Savages!"

"Shhh...calm yourself, Sweetheart," Rosina kissed him on the cheek, "we had a bit of a skirmish -"

"Skirmish!" Logan cried, "he was holding a sword to your throat!"

Annie looked puzzled.

"Why did you come back the same way, then?" she asked.

"I made sure we had an escort of four heavily armed guards," Logan

replied.

"It was very, very frightening," Rosina admitted, "but I was just about to stab him. He couldn't have held that sword a moment longer!" Then abruptly her tone changed. She was tired of the morbid tone of the conversation. She looked at Logan proudly.

"Logan rescued us as usual with the power of his magical silver tongue," she announced, laughing, "you may have the Sight, Annie, but Logan has the Speech."

"I need tae ask ane last question," Annie's tone was serious, but her green eyes were twinkling, "did somethin' else happen that day? There's somethin' ye're no tellin' me!"

There was a silence in which Rosina and Logan stared at each other fixedly. Eventually, Rosina threw up her hands.

"*A*ll right, all right," she sighed loudly, "he beat me in a contest of wills - but only because he is bigger and stronger than I am."

There was a gale of laughter around the table, which Rosina sheepishly and good-naturedly joined in.

"I would hae given my right airm tae see that!" Annie was almost in tears, she was laughing so much, "weel done Logan!"

"Now you," Rosina said, leaning forward eagerly to hear what Annie had to say.

"Naethin' much tae tell ye, lass," Annie replied, "we stayed in most o' the time, bein waited on haun' an' fit, except for the time we went oot and got me a bonny fancy dress an' a smart suit for Callum."

"Oh, let's see them!" Maisie clapped her hands and bounced up and down on her chair with excitement.

Annie brought the dress in, a modest maroon velvet creation with a cinched waist, leg of mutton sleeves and a high neck. Callum's suit was of rust-colored Harris tweed with a waistcoat, snowy white shirt and a great kilt made of Anderson tartan.

"Oh, won't you try them on for us?" Rosina asked.

"No' the noo, hen," Annie replied, "Callum is tired." She looked lovingly at her husband, who was dozing in a soft armchair by the fire, his bad leg resting on a padded stool. Rosina had a feeling that he would not be with them much longer, and she knew that Annie felt the same as she gazed wistfully at him.

"Annie," Rosina put her hand on Annie's, "can you wear it to my wedding?"

Annie looked at him with undisguised delight.

"Congratulations, Rosie! And congratulations tae you Logan!" her face was alight with happiness. "I am that pleased for ye!"

Logan looked at Rosina then back at Annie then he smiled widely.

"Thank you, Annie," he said happily, then sighed and shook his head. "This time last year I was a very lonely man with a burden that was weighing on me so heavily I could hardly stand it. Then along came my Rosina and lifted it off my shoulders." He laced his fingers with hers on the table, then kissed her lips softly.

"Do you feel like sharing it now?" Rosina asked gently.

He nodded, and began to speak. When he had finished, Annie patted his hand.

"The darkness," she said softly.

"Yes. But it's gone now," he gazed at Rosina for another moment as she frowned at him in puzzlement. "Something Annie's sight told me, Rosie. I will enlighten you later," he looked back at Annie, "and I have a child - a son. I saw him at the market with Loretta and he looks uncannily like me, so I know."

Malcolm, who had hitherto been silent, now spoke up.

"And are ye goin' tae try tae see him, Sir?" he asked anxiously.

Logan sighed.

"No, Malky," he replied sadly, "he has his own family now, his own life. I will not go and disturb it for my own selfish reasons. I'm glad that he is healthy and happy, and that is enough for me."

"Besides," Rosina put in, "I hope to be having lots of wee Logans as soon as we are married."

"Oh, Mistress, that would be wonderful!" Maisie sighed.

"So, Annie," Rosina asked, "we will have the wedding in the chapel at Castle Fraser. Will you come?"

Annie looked over at Callum and slowly shook her head. He was sleeping soundly now.

"It wid be too much for him, Rosie," she said sadly.

"Then we will have a blessing here too," Rosina said warmly, "for you cannot be left out, Mistress Anderson!"

Annie laughed and kissed Rosina affectionately on the forehead, thinking how much love there was in the room.

Back to the Lowlands

The journey back to Dumbarton was also uneventful, due to the presence of the guards. Rosina was comforted by their presence, for she had never experienced anything like the ambush on the road and hoped never to again. They came to Dumbarton castle first and were astonished to be greeted by Henri and Jacques, who ran out to meet them and stroke the horses. When they went inside Hugh and Monique came out to greet them in the hallway hand in hand, smiling joyfully. Monique was blushing and Hugh looked about ten years younger than the last time they had seen him.

"Father - Monique," she kissed him, looking mystified.

"It's a long story," Hugh said, "how was your journey?"

"It was fine - Father," Rosina was almost screaming with frustration, "what has happened? Forgive me Monique, good day."

Monique bowed.

"In short, my Lady," she informed her, "your father and I are getting married."

"What?" Rosina stopped dead in the tracks, but Logan urged her on with a hand in the small of her back.

"Rosie," Hugh urged, "come and have a glass of wine and we will talk."

Rosina allowed herself to be led into the big front room, then waited while Logan poured her some wine. He had a glass of water and they both sipped their drinks, waiting to be enlightened.

"We have been in love since the first time we looked at each other," he gazed at her tenderly, "and we became lovers. To cut a long story short, Connor found out, so Monique, Juliette and the boys moved in

here, and Monique and I are to be married as soon as the banns are called."

Logan was the first to recover. He stood up and bowed to both of them.

"Congratulations, and all the best to both of you!" he shook Hugh's hand and kissed Monique's, then Rosina embraced them both.

"I am so happy for you! Father - you have been lonely long enough, and I cannot imagine anyone better able to make you happy."

"I have something to ask you, Sir," Logan said to Hugh, "may we leave the ladies for a moment?"

*H*ugh stood up, smiling, and they walked outside. Logan looked Hugh directly in the eyes.

"May I have Rosina's hand in marriage?" he asked, bowing slightly. He was blushing and looked as if he wished the floor would open up and swallow him.

Hugh sighed.

"I thought you were never going to ask!" he laughed, "of course you may!" He clapped his future son-in-law on the shoulder and they went back to where Rosina and Monique were sitting silently, waiting, both suppressing smiles.

"We too are to be wed," he announced, "and hopefully very soon, for I cannot wait to give this lovely lady my name!"

Monique jumped up to congratulate them then put a finger in the air. She had thought of something.

"Why do we not have a double wedding?"

Hugh smiled at her indulgently.

"Whatever my Monique wants, my Monique gets," he said happily.

"Is this my father speaking?" Rosina laughed, "no, it must be a

different man!"

"Indeed it is, my daughter - indeed it is!" he smiled at Monique, "you see before you the happiest man alive!"

"There is one other favor I have to ask, Laird Hugh," Logan said carefully, and his face grew serious, "maybe we should wait till we have sorted out the matter of Alasdair's murder. I cannot live my life this way any longer, and I cannot expect Rosina to either. Will you help us?"

Hugh nodded, then thought for a moment, gazing at Logan thoughtfully.

"Logan," Hugh said gravely, "I will. If we join forces we can find out between us. I have many men who spied for me when the English occupied these parts and many others who owe me favors. Why do you not stay here? This castle has been the refuge of many a wanted man before. I think you always knew you could not do this alone."

Logan stood up and drew Rosina with him.

"I still can't believe anyone thinks you killed Alasdair," she lamented.

"I am going to find whoever is spreading these rumors," he said grimly, "and then I am going to deal with him - or them - with Hugh's help. Thank you, Sir. I accept your kind offer."

Hugh stepped forward.

"Good man," he said warmly, "now, let me show you where I am going to keep you. It is not the best accommodation and it may be a trifle draughty but it is very secure, for you are not the first fugitive who has stayed in it. If they can find you there I am the Man in the Moon!"

Then he looked at both the women he loved more than his life.

"Lovely ladies," he said gravely, "this is a big castle, and I will put

Logan safely in a place where no-one can find him. I don't want either of you to know where it is. Suffice to say that you are all now under my protection."

Rosina wrapped her arms around him.

"You are the best father in the world!" she said fervently.

Hugh led Logan along innumerable passages, slowly going up and up till they arrived in a long room at the level of the topmost battlements. From here they could see over the whole river, to Langbank on the other shore, then Port Glasgow, disappearing at Greenock as mist and distance swallowed it.

"I have never seen the river like this before," he said incredulously, "it is wondrous!"

Hugh laughed.

"Neither has Rosina," he informed him, "no-one has been here for years. When it is dark we will bring your belongings up," Hugh said, extending his arm so that Logan could follow him.

"Malcolm can help me," Logan said, "I would trust him with my life."

"Better that no-one knows but we two," Hugh answered, "then we will have a dram of the good stuff to celebrate our partnership. Oh, but I forgot that you don't care for it."

"No, it is not that," Logan put his hand on Hugh's arm. "I am a dipsomaniac, my Laird. I cannot allow myself to drink. Am I still fit to marry Rosie?" he asked anxiously.

"You have been honest," Hugh patted him on the shoulder, "just treat my Rosie right and I will be happy."

"Do you truly love my father?" Rosina asked Monique as they sat finishing their wine. Monique looked at Rosina, and when she smiled, her eyes were full of love.

"*R*osie, he is the finest man I ever knew," she said fervently, "he is considerate, kind, generous and he loves my nephews. And now I know that he is brave too. He is perfect!"

Rosina laughed.

"Not perfect," she said, "but a father to be proud of, certainly."

"Why has there been no woman before me?" Monique asked curiously, "surely he could have had anyone he wanted?"

Rosina nodded, staring into the fire.

"He asked someone once, but she refused him," she said, "he liked her, and she liked him, but they would not have made each other happy and afterward he was glad that she had turned him down. He wanted love, and now he has it." She frowned a little, "just one little thing bothers me."

"*What* is it?" Monique asked anxiously. Rosina looked at her mischievously, eyes twinkling.

"I hope you do not expect me to call you 'mother'!"

"Mother!" Monique threw back her head and laughed, "you forget, Ma Chérie, that I am French. 'Maman' will do nicely, I think!"

"*Monique* - er - Maman," Rosina giggled, "I think you and I are going to get along very well!"

Hiding Place

That night after dinner Logan and Hugh took his clothes and other personal possessions up to the attic. Afterwards, Logan took Malcolm aside for a few moments.

"I have never been here," he said firmly, "and neither have you, Malcolm. I won't need your services for a while but I will get a message to you when I do. If anyone asks, you don't know where I am. Here is something for you to get your Christmas goose and whatever else you need. Thank you for your faithfulness and friendship and a Happy Christmas to you and all your family."

He pressed a pouch into Malcolm's hand. it was heavy, and when Malcolm looked in, it was full of silver coins. Malcolm's eyes widened - he had never seen so much money.

"But Sir - I-" he began to protest.

"Not another word!" Logan gave him a gentle push, "goodnight and take care, Malky!"

Malcolm took the money home to his family, and indeed it was the best Christmas ever.



When it was time to retire, Logan kissed Rosina softly at the foot of the stairs leading to her bedroom.

"Can't I come with you?" she pleaded, pushing herself against him. His body responded to her instantly, but he pushed her away gently.

"Goodnight, Rosie. Sleep well."

He resolutely walked away and made his way upstairs. It was freezing in the attic, but there was a feather mattress with a pile of blankets two feet high beside it. He undressed, lit a candle and got into bed. It was cold at first, but the sheets became warm with the heat of his body soon enough, and he was just beginning to doze when he felt something warm and soft in the bed beside him, and smelled a familiar perfume.

"*Rosina!*" despite himself, he laughed, "how did you find me?"

"I followed you, of course!" she knocked on his forehead with her knuckles, then she said desperately: "I can't stay away from you any longer, Logan."

"You shouldn't have come here, Rosie," he whispered, "I'm only a man, and I only have so much willpower."

"Then give in," she wriggled closer to him and he groaned.

"No," he whispered, "I'll take you back to your room. Maisie will be wondering where you are."

"Maisie knows where I am," she answered, kissing him softly on his parted lips. She could hear his breathing begin to quicken and when she put her hand on his chest his heart was racing. He turned his back on her.

"Go away, Rosie," he groaned, "please."

"No, Logan, I won't."

"What if you get with child? If something happens to me -"

"Then I will have your child to remember you by."

He turned back to her. By the candlelight, with the yellow glow surrounding her like a halo, she looked like an angel.

Rosina could see him weakening and bent over to kiss him.

His resolve cracked open like a dam bursting and he gave up, surrendering to her. He crushed her against his body as if he wanted to make an imprint of hers on it, then kissed her the same way till she gave a little moan of pain.

"My darling Rosie," he whispered, "however did I live my life without you all these years? I love you."

"I love you too," she whispered as tears began to leak down her face, "and I will never stop loving you as long as there is breath in my body. I never knew I could feel like this."

Then there was no more talking. He kissed her everywhere, little teasing, nibbling kisses that made her laugh and squirm with delight. She passed her hands over the soft skin of his back and shoulders, feeling the powerful muscles underneath. When he kissed her lips he gently teased her tongue with his, but held back from the passionate contact of earlier. It was not as she had expected her first time to be - light-hearted, teasing and utterly delightful. At last, she arched her back, wanting more, and he entered her body as gently as he could. For a second he saw her face spasm with pain, then she smiled straight into his eyes and hugged him tightly against herself, wrapping her legs around him. They began to move with each other then a feeling came over her like nothing she had ever experienced before, wave after wave of the most delicious sensation building up to a crescendo till she cried out in ecstasy.

After a moment Logan reached his own climax and they lay, spent and sated, breathing heavily and laughing softly. Rosina was as contented as a purring cat.

"Now, my Laird," she said triumphantly, "you are mine. I claim you."

"Rosie, you are mad," he laughed, "your father is going to find us."

"My father is sleeping with his own mistress!" she pointed out. Logan pushed her hair back with his fingers and smiled.

"Are you happy now, Rosie?" he whispered. His eyelids were beginning to droop and he yawned, then gradually drifted off to sleep.

"Yes, my love," she whispered, "very happy."

Then she turned around and spooned her body in front of his, pressing her back against his stomach, then she too went to sleep. At some point during the night, Logan draped his arm over her and she woke up. She turned around and saw him smiling in his sleep. It seemed that Logan was happy too.



Maisie didn't have to be told to figure out where Rosina had gone. She had been excused early and Rosina had suspiciously disappeared. She felt extremely jealous that her mistress was spending the night with her lover when hers was so far away, but it had been her choice. She had already penned her first letter to Findlay, although she had not yet sent it. She read it over again, but she knew that however many times she changed the words they would never adequately express how she felt. It was a very short letter, but she hoped that she had packed into it all the love she could.

"My dearest Findlay,

We arrived home a few hours ago, and though it was good to see Dumbarton again I am already missing you. Please write back to me as soon as you can, and please believe me when I tell you that you are never far from my thoughts and always in my heart. I miss your smile and the funny way you talk when you want to make me laugh. I miss everything about you, and I hope to be in your arms again before too long.

Your loving Maisie x

She kissed the letter before sealing it, hoping it was enough.

Christmas

Connor had decided that he hated women - all women without exception. They were cold-hearted, vain, selfish creatures who cared nothing for a man's pride or comfort.

His servants now suffered at his hands, not because he was violent towards them, but because he had become selfish and inconsiderate himself, keeping them working long after they should have finished, denying them the little bonuses he used to give them and never giving them a word of praise or encouragement. Connor was becoming the kind of bitter and twisted man he hated.

He had begun to despise Monique the moment he discovered the truth about her affair with Hugh, but he did not see why his good name had to suffer because she was a slut.

Accordingly, he started a rumor that he had kicked her out because of her dalliance with Hugh. It only took a few subtle innuendoes before tongues started wagging. Connor would look sorrowful and when someone asked him why he would tell them that he had been obliged to throw out his fiancée because of her unfaithfulness.

Soon it was all over the district that she was no more than a gold-digger, wanting marriage from one man and passion from the other. Her reputation was ruined, but she and Juliette had always gone their own unconventional French way, and did not care for the companionship of stuffy Scottish society. As Hugh said, he knew who his real friends were and cared nothing about the rest and because he was a good and fair man his business did not suffer.

So once again Connor tried to get on with his life, and like many a man before him in similar circumstances, he sought comfort in the bottom of a whiskey bottle.

It would soon be Christmas, and he had no-one with whom to spend it. He had invited a few friends, but everyone had already made plans. Fortunately, he was invited to a business acquaintance's house for Christmas dinner right at the last minute. He was sure that he had only been invited to make numbers even if there was a lady on her own, but he accepted the invitation eagerly and thankfully. At least he would not be alone on Christmas Day.

Monique felt very bad about Connor and said as much to Hugh on Christmas Eve.

"I wish there was something I could do for him," she sighed, "he is not a bad man and I wronged him."

"We both did," Hugh said, kissing her shining hair, "but do not forget he did a great disservice to my daughter. Someday he will find happiness, although I think it will be a long time before he trusts another woman." Monique sighed.

"I will pray for him that it does not take too long."

She put her head against his chest and breathed in the scent of his skin. They were lying in bed, about to go to sleep, and neither felt any passionate urges. Monique did, however, feel like the most fortunate woman alive as she fell asleep in Hugh's arms.

Christmas at Dumbarton Castle promised to be everything a proper family Christmas should be. Although Hogmanay and New Year were the biggest occasions for celebration, Christmas was still a festive time, albeit a more modest one. The family of Hugh, Rosina, Logan, Monique, Juliette, the twins, and Maisie celebrated with a huge goose, stuffed with breadcrumbs, onions, and sage. There was a mountain of

golden roast potatoes, shortbread, black bun and about a gallon of cream. Best of all was Cranachan, a gorgeous concoction of raspberries, cream, toasted oatmeal, whiskey and honey, although to the regret of the ladies and Hugh the whiskey had had to be left out because of the twins and Logan. There was also a Clootie Dumpling, more traditional at Hallowe'en, but served that day because the twins loved it. Hugh had somehow managed to see to it that pints of piping hot coffee were available and they ate it with tablet, the very sweet Scottish fudge beloved by Scots all over the world. After the food was served Hugh banished the servants to their own banquet.

*H*ugh insisted on saying grace that day, something that was not done often in the Buchanan household, but since each one of them had found a new love that year, it seemed appropriate that thanks should be given. Any cares and worries of the last few months were put aside, and they fell on the food like a pack of wolves. Afterward, they were so full that they could hardly move, and the twins fell asleep on the carpet in front of the fire and did not receive their presents until the evening. They got their first fishing rods and had to be physically restrained from dashing out into the freezing rain to try their luck in the river.

"*I* was like that once," Hugh said wistfully, sipping his whiskey and trying to stay awake, "it will be good to have children around again."

"You may regret saying that," Juliette laughed, "after a few more months!"

Rosina was already asleep, curled up on Logan's lap like a contented cat.

"I think it's time for bed," he announced, frowning at the thought of waking her up, "goodnight my ladies, Laird." He stood up, holding her in his arms and she still did not stir, so he carried her all the way up to her bedroom and deposited her gently on the bed, which Maisie had already turned down. Logan kissed her on the forehead and tiptoed out.

"Lock the door," he whispered to Maisie. She looked at him and smiled mischievously.

"Yes, my Laird," she replied, giggling.

Hugh had not stopped thinking, and inquiring around all his friends and business associates in the district about the possibility that Logan had killed Alasdair McPhail. The story had died down a bit and had been replaced by other, fresher scandals but the consensus was still the same. Logan Fraser had either killed Alasdair or knew who had.



Hugh now knew that Connor was a master at spreading rumors and a wizard of deception, and wondered if it was he had planted a seed in someone's mind. It would not have been too hard to do. The servants were busy mingling among the guests delivering food and copious amounts of ale, wine, and whiskey. Most of the company had been partly if not wholly inebriated, and although the part of the courtyard used for the reception had been well-lit, it was only a small part of a vast space where there were plenty of dark corners and alleys to run down and hide in.

Now he knew that Connor had hated his brother but secretly loved Rosina he wondered if he had killed his brother and tried to make it look like an accident. It would not have been very difficult. The place where the body had been was in a culvert leading down to the moat, where no-one would go for fear of breaking their ankles in the dark. In fact, it would have been even darker in contrast to the bright torchlight. He went downstairs and tried to visualize the scene. No doubt Alasdair himself had not been entirely sober.

He would have to have come down an extremely badly lit staircase at the back that was so dangerous in the dark that even the servants dared not use it. He must have then crept to his hiding place somewhere in the stables - whatever had possessed the man to think of such a stupid hiding place? Then he must have encountered his attacker in the blackest part of the whole vast place. Hugh could think of no earthly reason why Alasdair would do such a thing unless of course there was another explanation.

He thought back on the night of Rosina's wedding, and the moment when she had come to see him. One moment she had been almost hysterical but the next moment she had joked about Alasdair being drunk. And then a memory came back to him that had not seemed significant at the time. Her eyes had been red as if she had been weeping. Why would she be weeping on her wedding night? Had Alasdair hurt her? He paused for a moment and went around the wall to look out over the river, the sight of which always calmed him, but not today. A terrible suspicion was growing in his mind and the more he tried to put it away the more it came back, like a biting insect that would not stop pestering him. He sighed. It was time to speak to Logan. He ordered some tea and took it up with him to Logan's eyrie at the top of the castle. He had a book, which was lying open face-down on his chest, and he was looking out of the window. He turned and smiled widely as Hugh came in.

"Just what I needed!" he said gratefully. He took a sip and looked up expectantly. "You did not hike all the way upstairs to bring me a cup of tea, my Laird. Have you been thinking about my problem?"

"Our problem," Hugh replied, smiling, "yes, I have. That night everyone was all over the place and most of us were drunk to some degree. I know I was. When Rosie came down to tell us Alastair was missing she was hysterical one minute and joking the next, and one thing I have only remembered now was that she had been crying. Why would she do that on her wedding night? She said she had been

sleeping - crying in her sleep?"

Logan shrugged.

"Tears of joy?" he speculated, "she had just been making love to her husband for the first time."

Hugh shook his head firmly.

"She was still a virgin," he said vehemently, "she told Maisie, and Maisie had no reason to lie to me," he paused, "but she is a virgin no longer, Logan, is she?"

Logan, with his shy demeanor, always blushed more noticeably than anyone else. His cheeks were on fire now.

"I cannot deny it, my Laird," he admitted sorrowfully.

Hugh patted him on the shoulder.

"*R*elax, Logan," he laughed, "it would be very hypocritical of me to censure you for the same thing I am doing myself!"

Logan let out a deep sigh of relief.

"Thank you," he said, "I was truly worried. There is nothing in the world I want more than to marry Rosina."

"I felt the same about her mother," Hugh said wistfully, then shook his thoughts back to the present, "anyway, back to our problem. She was behaving very strangely that night."

"It is not every day a lady gets married," Logan pointed out, "I think you may be reading too much into this, my Laird. Perhaps she was just overwhelmed."

Hugh shook his head again as if to dislodge something inside it.

"I keep thinking - then I think again - no, it can't be," his voice was tense, as though he were angry with himself.

"My Laird, you are making no sense," he said insistently, "what are you trying to say?"

Hugh looked him directly in the eye.

"Logan, do you think she killed him?"

Logan's mouth dropped open. Hugh had guessed the truth and for once his silver tongue had deserted him. But before he had a chance to react Rosina's voice said from behind him:

"Yes, Father, I killed him." Her tone was harsh and bitter, "and I am not sorry."

Rosina's Story

Hugh was dumbstruck, but after a moment, when he recovered the power of speech, he turned to her and said:

"Rosina - why?"

"Because he was going to rape me!" She shouted angrily, "he might even have killed me. He struck me across the face twice and knocked me down, and I don't know what else he was going to do after that! He was like a madman - and he was drunk."

She paused for a moment to compose herself, feeling tears stinging her eyes. However, they were not tears of anger but tears of rage as she remembered the sheer terror of those few moments.

"I hardly remember picking up the candlestick," she said grimly, "I just grabbed at the first thing I saw. I did not mean to kill him, but I am glad he's dead."

Hugh was staring at her in disbelief.

"You - my precious, gentle daughter," he swallowed, "you killed a man?"

"NO FATHER!" She roared into his face, "I did not kill a MAN! I killed a loathsome, despicable MONSTER!"

"But why didn't you tell me?" He asked, and his tone was pitiful.

"So that you could do what?" Rosina said scathingly, "panic? That's what you would have done, Father. I would have - most of us would have."

Hugh put his head in his hands for a moment, then stood up.

"Excuse me, but this has been a shock," he said heavily, "I am going to

get a drink and I will be back shortly."

He got up and went out, closing the door none too gently behind him.

"This is why I said nothing," she sat down. "He is such a strong man in most ways, Logan, but faced with something like this - he cannot cope. Look at him."

Logan pulled her up into his arms.

"Give him a chance," he said gently, "as he said, it has been a shock and he does not yet know how to react."

*R*osina nodded.

"I'm afraid," she whispered against his chest, "I was not afraid enough before."

Logan sighed.

"Your father will not betray you," he reassured her. "He loves you, and will do everything he can to help you."

She looked up at him with tear-filled eyes and he smiled at her tenderly.

"You're so small," he whispered, "sometimes I just want to wrap my arms around you and take you away somewhere peaceful where nothing or nobody will ever worry us again."

She laughed softly.

"I would love that, but I might get lonely."

"Then we would need to have children," he proposed.

She sighed contentedly.

"Oh, that would be so wonderful!" she breathed, "at least one boy and one girl."

They lay on the bed for a while and Rosina listened to the steady beat

of Logan's heart next to her ear as he held her.

"I could lie here forever," she said, "just like this."

"You'd get hungry," he pointed out. Rosina lay in his arms for a moment longer then stirred restlessly.

"I have to go and talk to him," she stood up, "I will be back soon, my love."

"Do not back down, Rosie," Logan said, holding her hands, "don't let him make excuses for what Alasdair did - I am not saying that he will, or that he's a bad man, but I've seen that attitude before from men. Please don't be offended."

"I'm not," she answered, kissing him, "but I warn you, Logan, if he tries to blame me or you for this I will cut him off. He will be dead to me - that is how much I love you."

"Rosie - no!" he said desperately, "I am not going to be responsible for that. Talk to him but don't do anything you will regret. Promise me. Promise me, Rosina!"

She was astonished by his distress.

"I promise, my love. Don't upset yourself."

He nodded, and with a last backward glance, she went downstairs.

Logan's distress was partly for himself as his thoughts strayed to the son who would never know him. He had no wish for Hugh to be at war with his daughter, whom he loved very much. It may have been a threat made in the reaction to his obviously inadequate reaction, but Rosina was stubborn, and her reaction to most things that hurt her was to kick back against them, as she was doing now. He sighed. He could only wait and see what happened.

When Rosina went down to see her father he was sitting in the parlor with a full glass of whiskey in his hands. Tears were streaming down his face.

"Why?" he asked, his face screwed up with pain, "how could you? You could have called for help."

Rosina was speechless for a moment.

"*If* I could have, I would have," she replied coldly, "but there was so much noise and it all happened so fast that I could not. But Logan was passing and he helped me. He and Maisie were my rocks, Father. I couldn't tell you because I knew this would happen. You thought Alasdair was a good catch for me even though he was not very wealthy. So did I. Maisie had her doubts but she could do nothing since she had no evidence. Connor could have told me but he didn't because he thought I might think he was jealous - he thought he loved me. So many people knew him, but nobody said anything. I had to find out the hard way!"

She stopped, breathing heavily and glaring at him.

"Rosie - I am truly sorry," Hugh replied, "I blame myself entirely. Sometimes there was a little sign - a look, the way he gripped your arm so tightly - a hint of possessiveness, but I thought I was imagining things. I thought I was being an over-protective father who just did not want to let his daughter go into the arms of another man. You were almost killed because of my stupidity."

Rosina put her arms around him and kissed his hair.

"You were not to blame, Father, but neither was I," she said urgently, "I was fighting for my life - but this is a man's world. Who is going to take the word of a woman? Forgive me, Father, but look how you reacted at first. If I had not managed to get away I would have been hanged. I did not want to involve you because I knew it would weigh on your conscience."

Hugh said nothing for a moment, then patted the seat next to him so that Rosina could sit next to him.

"It will, Rosie, and I will not lie to you," he replied, gravely, "but I would never hand you over to be executed. But we have to prove that Logan did not do this. Please tell me the story."

"I need some whiskey, Father," she took a ragged breath, "this was a terrifying experience and it is really unpleasant to relive it. But I know you need to hear it."

"I am sorry, Rosie," he said sadly, but if I am to help Logan I need to hear the details."

She nodded, took a deep breath and began to tell her father what had happened. Afterward, Hugh drained his glass and steeped his hands, leaning back in his chair.

"So he did put the body in the drain?"

She nodded.

"But there was no fuss till they found it a while later," she pointed out, "and there was a lot of confusion."

"True," her father said, his eyes faraway as he thought about the situation, "so this takes us back to what we were discussing earlier. "Someone has started this and it has got bigger and bigger."

"It's someone with a grudge," she replied, "I keep wondering who it could be - Maisie and I tried to find out but we couldn't."

"Connor?"

Rosina shook her head.

"Why would he?"

Hugh racked his brains.

"Why indeed?" he mused.

Just then, Logan appeared.

"I'm not hiding up there any longer," he said defiantly, "I have done nothing wrong."

"We know," Rosina replied anxiously, "but not everyone else does."

"I will handle it," he replied grimly, "this ends now," he looked at Hugh, "I am going to call Malcolm then I'm going to see Big Sam and that other grubby little imp."

"I will come with you," Hugh said grimly, standing up. "I have a strange feeling that we are getting close to the answer."

Speaking to Sam

Maggie, Logan's oversized mare, had been cooped up in the stable for a long time and was raring to go when she was saddled up by her master. She was dancing around so much that he had great difficulty in getting on her back. Eventually, he managed, however, and she calmed down, but she was as impatient to get going as the men were.

Malcolm had been worried when Logan said they wanted to come with him, but Logan had been adamant.

"No more hiding," he said grimly, "if someone wants to accuse me of murder let them have the courage to do it face to face. All I did was put a body on the ground, and that man was not murdered. He was killed in self-defense by someone who was fighting for her life."

"Aye, sir, I knaw that, but if anythin' happens tae ye -"

Logan patted his arm and smiled.

"I will handle everything, Malcolm," he said, "don't worry."

Hugh's face looked as grim as the lowering sky which promised a blizzard later.

"Let us go," he said in a tone that brooked no defiance, "I want to find out who is endangering my daughter's happiness."



The blacksmith's shop in Dumbarton was easy to find in the twilight by the glow of its burning forge, and Big Sam was there holding up a big horse's foot, just as he had been doing the last time Malcolm spoke to him. He was black from head to foot and as they watched he put the horse's foot down and swiped an arm across his sweating forehead.

He eyed the three strangers with undisguised hostility.

"Efternoon," Malcolm said, smiling, "how ye keepin', Sam?"

"Fine," Sam said suspiciously, wiping his hands on a rag, "can I help ye?"

"Yes," Logan said, staring at him fixedly out of his blue eyes, darkened by his lowering brows as he stared fixedly at him, "I need to ask you some questions about the night of Alasdair McPhail's wedding. I believe you were there."

"Aye," he said grudgingly, "jist tae help wi' settin it a' up and takin' it a' doon again, like. Whit's this about?"

"I am Laird Logan Fraser," Logan bowed slightly, to Sam's surprise, "and this is Laird Hugh Buchanan." Hugh also gave Sam a slight bow. He was amazed. He was not used to this level of respect from an upper-class gentleman.

"I have been accused of murder," Logan said. His voice was pleasant on the surface but there was an underlying layer of menace. Sam was a big man, but Logan was even bigger, and Sam looked at his feet as Logan spoke to him. "I heard that you had seen me putting a body into a ditch where it was found later."

Sam fidgeted, cleared his throat and crossed his arms defensively over his chest.

"Aye, weel, I saw somethin'" he said grudgingly. He was beginning to look frightened.

Logan put a hand on his shoulder.

"Look, Sam," he said gently, "I just want to find out the truth. I know you're scared, and I think I know why. Did someone threaten you?"

The big man turned away and bent his head for a moment then began to pace up and down, obviously in the grip of some internal struggle.

"Aye," he said at last, "somebody did."

"Can you tell us who?" Hugh asked, trying to keep his voice calm and even. He felt like slapping the man.

"He paid me a few shillins but he said he would harm my family if I told anybody who he was," he replied, his voice quivering, "I was just to say that I caught a glimpse of somebody with fair hair like Laird Fraser. I was to mention your name."

"Did you tell a lot of people?" Logan asked, still gently.

"Anybody that asked, and usually they would buy me a drink," he replied guiltily, "well, I started to say a wee bit more than I needed to because - well - nobody ever paid me much mind before but now everybody wanted to talk to me and buy me a drink," he shrugged, "so I got a bit carried away."

Logan nodded.

"If you are telling me the truth and someone threatened your family then I understand," he sighed and said: "look at me, Sam."

Sam looked up, his brown eyes wide and frightened.

"Swear that you're telling me the truth," he said solemnly.

"I swear on the life of my son, my Laird."

"So what exactly did you see, Sam?" Hugh asked, still gritting his teeth, "any men with hats? Maybe blue ones?"

Sam shrugged.

"Naethin'," he said simply, "I was in that corner when they found it but

I never saw the body till they lifted it up. There wis a lot o' people there and plenty o' men wi bunnets amang them, but naebody as big as you, my Laird."

"Can you stop talking about it now?" Logan asked, "I won't threaten you, don't worry. If you hear anything else will you contact me? Malcolm comes into town from time to time and he will stop by."

"Are you sure you can't tell us who this person is?" Hugh asked. His face had an aggressive expression and Sam shook his head violently.

"*N*aw, my Laird, I cannae risk any harm tae my faimly," he looked around to see if anyone was looking at them but no-one was taking any notice. Logan pressed a few shillings into his hand and he smiled widely.

"If anyone asks, I was here to see you about trimming my horse's hooves," Logan said, "you will hear from me soon."

Sam watched them ride away and looked at the money in his hand. For the first time in a long while he did not feel afraid.

Hugh and Logan rode back to Dumbarton Castle in silence. Each of them was thinking his own thoughts, and arrived at their destination just as the snow began to fall.

Rosina ran out to greet them and threw herself into Logan's arms.

"I was so worried!" she buried her head in his chest and he smiled at Hugh over the top of her head.

"I am so glad she chose me," he said happily, laughing, "my life will never be dull again."

"I'll make sure of it!" she promised then her expression changed, "what did you find out?"

"We found out that this is a deliberate campaign," Hugh answered grimly, "and it was started by someone whose name we cannot find out. Big Sam is too afraid to tell us."

"I think it may be Connor," Logan said suddenly.

"But what would be his motive?" Rosina asked, "I can't think of one."

Logan frowned, then sat thinking silently for a long moment.

"He does not like me," he replied slowly, "he never has since the time that we were both trying to buy the same piece of land once and I outbid him. Maybe that is a motive, but I cannot see a man taking revenge for such a trivial matter when he is so wealthy."

"*We* never know how people's minds work, Logan," Hugh said pensively, "perhaps it is a matter of pride. We men can sometimes let it go to our heads!"

"You should speak to him," Rosina said.

The two Lairds looked at each other and laughed.

"I do not think that would work," Hugh said, somewhat cynically. "I am the man who took away his fiancée, remember?"

"I can do it," Rosina said brightly, "I could tell him I want to apologize to him for being mean to him. He may be willing to talk to me."

"You will have to do it on neutral ground, though," Hugh warned.

"I have an idea," Logan was suddenly animated, "we will all be guests at your friend Laird Strachan's Hogmanay Celebration on Sunday. Why do we not speak to him then? Rosina can engage him in conversation then we can surprise him."

"No," Rosina said firmly, "Father can surprise him. You were invited a while ago, but you are a wanted fugitive now."

"I have to be there!" Logan protested, "I need to confront him."

Hugh and Rosina looked at each other.

"Logan, it is not safe," she said urgently, "he has many friends. It would take only one of them to get the Constables."

Logan could see the sense in this, but he was determined to be there by hook or by crook.

"You can travel hidden in our carriage," Rosina suggested suddenly,

"then hide and speak to Connor when I have him to myself. I flatter myself that my feminine wiles will be enough to get him on his own."

Logan laughed heartily.

"That I do not doubt," he kissed her forehead, then looked at Hugh, raising his eyebrows.

"Let us do it!" Hugh said, his voice determined, "this matter must be settled as soon as possible."

Preparing for Battle

Maisie was looking out of the window of Rosina's bedroom when she came in, but turned hastily as she heard her mistress's entrance. Rosina looked at the tears running down her face and immediately went over to wrap her arms around her.

"Is it Findlay?" Rosina asked softly, then felt Maisie nod against her shoulder. "Are you missing him?"

"Yes, Mistress." Maisie pulled herself out of Rosina's embrace and wiped her eyes with a hankie, trying to smile.

"I'm sorry, Mistress," she said huskily, "I am being very foolish."

"Missing the man you love is not foolish, Maisie," Rosina said tenderly, "and I want you to be happy, so tell me what you want to do. We wanted to spend time in both castles, but it would not be practical."

Maisie nodded, then said sadly:

"I will have to bear the separation till I can see him again. Maybe he will find someone else anyway."

"He had years to find someone," Rosina said reasonably, "but he found nobody till he met you, Maisie. Let me think about this," she planted a soft kiss on Maisie's bent head, "I must find a way that you can be together, or I will not be happy either."

"Thank you, Mistress," Maisie replied, nodding. She helped Rosina to dress for dinner then got on with the rest of her duties for the evening before readying her mistress for bed. As soon as Rosina had retired she lay down to sleep, but sleep would not come easily. She comforted herself with remembering the day she had asked Findlay to show her what was underneath the eye patch.



They had been sitting having tea in the small cozy library that was one of Findlay's favorite places. The walls were lined with bookshelves and the floors covered in jewel-colored Turkish carpets. Maisie had a spare hour, and so did Findlay, so they sat in front of a roaring fire watching the snow fall outside.

"When did you lose your eye?" she asked curiously, "if you don't mind me asking?"

"Oooh...nigh on ten years ago," he answered, smiling.

"Why are you smiling?"

He laughed.

"Because you have to smile or you would go mad!" He took a sip of tea. "I was a bit drunk - more than a bit - I got aggressive and so did somebody else. I don't remember anything that happened. This is what I was told later, and I was unconscious for a long time. I wasn't expected to live, but I did because I'm too stubborn and spiteful to die!"

She laughed.

"I'm glad you did," she said softly.

"So am I lass," he picked up her hand and kissed it, "especially now."

She looked at him keenly for a moment.

"May I see it?"

"It's not a pretty sight," he replied, "if you'll pardon the pun."

He peeled back the eye patch. He had not been lying when he

described the injury. It was indeed ugly.

There was a mass of wrinkled and puckered flesh on either side of a jagged line where the remains of what was left of his eyelids had been crudely stitched together. Above and below this were smaller scars where little pieces of glass had been embedded. Maisie reached out and touched the scars gently with her forefinger. Findlay held the patch up and let her look at it till she was satisfied.

"Shocked?" he asked. She shook her head.

"I am glad that you were spared," she said fervently.

He kissed her softly.

"I have only known you a few days," he said gently, "and yet I feel as if I have known you forever."

"*I* feel the same," she replied, "but I must tell you something."

"Yes?" he asked anxiously.

"While we are sitting here talking," she began, "our tea is getting cold!"

He was silent for a moment, then he threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

"Then let us drink it," he said when he calmed down, "to your health, Maisie."

"And yours, Findlay," she replied, as they clinked their cups together.

"Do you have to go back?" he asked sadly.

She nodded.

"Yes, I do, Findlay," she sighed, "but if what we feel for each other is real, it will stand the test of time. If not," she shrugged, "then it was never real, to begin with."

*H*e nodded slowly, looking into the fire.

"You are right," he agreed, "but that is so easy to say. The reality is harder. I have never felt about anyone else the way I feel about you, Maisie."

"I have to go," she said regretfully, "the Mistress has arrived home from her ride with the Laird Logan."

"Fortunate couple," he said sorrowfully, "they can stay together."

Maisie said nothing else but smiled sadly then turned and left the room. Two days later they all went home.



Rosina dressed very carefully for the gathering on Hogmanay night. The snow was four inches deep, so she wore a thick all-enveloping winter cloak and a fur muff over her dress. It was a lace-trimmed lilac dress with a fashionable bustle and a bodice that gave the tiniest hint of her full bosom. Maisie had piled her abundant golden-red hair on top of her head, having spent most of the afternoon coaxing it into curls and ringlets. When she had finished she put on a ruby necklace that had been her mother's, together with a set of matching earrings.

"Mistress," Maisie said rapturously, "you look beautiful!"

"All thanks to you!" Rosina reminded her.

"It's my job, Mistress!" she pointed out, "but it makes me very, very happy to see you look so pretty."

"Thank you, Maisie," Rosina's voice was grim, "but tonight I have a job to do, so I need to look my very best. Tonight I am going to speak to Connor McPhail, and I have awkward questions for him. So this is not just a dress, for I am going into battle!"

Connor's Story

"Are you all right?" Rosina asked Logan, who was crouched on the floor at her feet. He was cramped and frozen, and thought Rosina's question a very stupid one, so he only nodded and smiled.

"Poor love," she said sympathetically, "we'll be there soon."

When they rattled through the gates Logan jumped out of the carriage and disappeared into the shadows. Hugh and Rosina went inside where they were greeted by the host and escorted to the table where the buffet was being served. Monique had decided not to go since she did not want to spoil Hugh's plan by antagonizing Connor.

They mingled with the company for half an hour or so before seeing Connor, who was on his own, but looked very relaxed, laughing and joking with a crowd of other Lairds and wealthy farmers, the cream of society in that area of the Lowlands. Rosina stood looking at him for a full minute till she caught his eye and gave him a tentative smile.

He returned it with a deep frown from under his brows, then gave her a formal little bow before turning his body away from her and presenting her his back. She took a deep breath and joined the circle of men around him, smiling. At once she was welcomed into their company.

"My Lady Rosina!" Gordon Strachan extended an arm to include her in their group, "I am so glad you could come!"

"Thank you for inviting me, my Laird," she replied warmly. She looked around at the bright decorations, the crystal chandeliers, the gorgeously colorful satins and laces of the ladies' dresses and the bold

shades of the lens' tartan kilts. There must have been easily two hundred people there, she thought, all trying to be heard above each other. There was a fiddler who could hardly be heard above the din, but Rosina tapped Connor on the shoulder and had to almost shout in his ear to make herself heard.

"Connor - may I speak to you for a few moments? I will not keep you long."

He looked at her and nodded tersely, then she led him to the main door in the big hallway, where she turned to him. She looked adorable, he thought, but he refused to let his heart soften.

"Lady Rosina," he began, deliberately using her formal title, "I cannot think of anything you may have left to say to me."

"I wanted to apologize for the way I spoke to you last time I saw you," she said humbly, looking at her feet, "my only excuse is that I was still upset about Alasdair, and any thought of another man, especially his brother, was abhorrent to me at that time. I am truly sorry."

Connor looked down at her, stony-faced for a moment, then reluctantly said: "I will consider it, my Lady. I was very hurt."

Just then, Hugh came up behind Connor and tapped his shoulder.

"Good evening, Connor," he said pleasantly, "how are you?"

Connor's face darkened.

"All the worse for seeing you, Buchanan," he glowered at him, then at Rosina, "you are no lady, Rosina. You set a trap for me."

"I am a lady in name only," she replied, as the door behind her opened to admit Logan, "but when my family and my love is involved, I am a tigress."

Connor's eyes widened, and he smiled sarcastically.

"Ah, the Laird Fraser," he said, in a mock-friendly tone, "how are you my friend?"

"Still well, in spite of all your best efforts," Logan said grimly, stepping

so close to the smaller man that he had to tilt his head backward.

"What do you mean?" Connor asked defiantly, "I have done nothing to you!" He stepped back into the solid body of Hugh, who was standing right behind him.

"Where shall I start?" Logan asked airily. "Before I left for the Highlands, I was almost arrested by two constables for the charge of murdering your brother Alasdair. I managed to talk my way out of it, but it might have been very different. When I came back a few days ago I found that I was still a wanted man, even though I have done nothing wrong. I had been told by my manservant to go and speak to Big Sam, who helps at the blacksmith. Apparently, he had been paid to spread rumors about me, specifically that he had seen me dumping your brother's body. He said that if he identified whoever told him to do it his family would be harmed, so he said nothing. So we worked it out ourselves. You were the only person it could be. So tell us - why?"

"You're mad!" Connor shouted, "why would I do that?"

Rosina chimed in then.

"I think I know," she said in wonder, "it was because of me, wasn't it?"

Connor looked at her as if she had lost her head.

"Do not flatter yourself, Madam!" he said scathingly, "if I had wanted you I would have asked."

"But you did, and I rejected you," she replied, "but I had not yet formed a relationship with Hugh then, so why did you want to harm him?"

Connor sighed and looked around him.

"All of these accusations are baseless," his voice was exasperated, "I had nothing to do with any of this!"

Logan looked at Rosina, then at Hugh.

"I had hoped it would not come to this," he told them. He was wearing a little leather bag slung across his chest and hanging at his hip. Out of it he took a small leather-bound Bible, and held it out to Connor. "If you are telling the truth you will not mind swearing to it on pain of eternal damnation if you lie."

Connor began to tremble as he looked at the book lying on Logan's palm. he raised his hand as if to lay it on the pages but then drew it back. His face was anguished.

"I-I cannot," he said, defeated, then took a deep draught of his whiskey. "I will tell you everything, but before I begin, I will make no apology. You have both wounded me deeply," he looked at Hugh and Rosina. "And I-"

"What does this have to do with Logan?" Rosina interrupted, frowning, "this is not his concern."

"Is it not?" Connor's eyes met Logan's in a duel of glares across the room, "tell me, Logan, does anyone at all like you?"

"I do!" Rosina said stoutly, "I love him!"

"And that is why you did not want me?" he asked bitterly.

"No, Connor," Rosina answered levelly, "I did not want you because of the family you came from and because I do not love you."

Connor shrugged.

"So?" Hugh asked, "we are still waiting for an answer."

Connor had dropped all pretense now, and his manner was proud and defiant.

"I wanted Rosina because not only did I love her - or thought I did - I knew that when Hugh died the estate would become mine," he said frankly, "and I knew that if Logan was hanged for murder I could buy

his estate for a song - and the one in the North. He is so universally disliked it was easy to start that rumor! Then I would have had four estates to give me a huge income and I would have been the biggest landowner in the area. I could pass those estates on to my children. Then you stole Monique from me, and now I have no chance - I hate all women!"

Hugh smiled languidly.

"You never did have a chance, Connor," he said, "Monique is infertile. She needed your money to support her family, but you knew that. It would be good for your self-esteem to have a beauty on your arm though, and she was prepared to marry you first and tell you later, but I thought you were a man of honor and ought to know. I wanted to break off the relationship and I tried. She tried too, but we could not, but when you found out you would have thrown her out in the snow!"

"With her loud sister and meddling brats!" he spat out, "yes, I would have. Now I know that she is infertile I am even more glad to be rid of her! And what of you? Did you not want more children?"

"What I want or do not want is none of your concern," Hugh said flatly, "you are beyond contempt! You would use and intimidate a poor man, throw a woman and her family out of your house in midwinter and see an innocent man hang. And you would use my daughter. You are disgusting."

"You stole my woman!" Connor roared, is that not contemptible too?"

"She came to me of her own free will," Hugh corrected him, "no matter what happened between us I would never throw her out to freeze in the depths of winter!"

For a moment Connor looked as if he was going to hit Hugh but stopped as he realized that a crowd had gathered, and it was a crowd that had heard everything that had been said. It was loud in the ballroom, but the people nearest the door had heard and drifted into the hallway, followed by others till the hallway was almost full. Even the fiddler had stopped playing.

Connor, Hugh, and Logan had been shouting loudly enough for everyone to hear, and now Laird Strachan came striding down the

passage.

"*I* have heard enough," he said sternly, "Connor, you disappoint me. As magistrate of this district I have to arrest you."

Connor was struggling with the chains that two burly guards were attaching to his hands.

"On what charge?" Connor asked indignantly.

"Conspiracy to murder and perverting the course of justice," Strachan replied, then nodded to the guards who took his writhing figure away. Connor was squealing and protesting, but Logan stepped in between them.

"Nothing happened to me," he said grimly, "I took away the woman he loved and perhaps he has cause to hate me, so please be merciful." Just then, the church bells began to ring in the New Year. Logan grabbed Rosina and kissed her as if his life depended on it.

"I'm so happy," he laughed, but Rosina was less so.

"Why did you do that, Logan?" she asked anxiously.

Logan looked down at her troubled face.

"I don't want him to hang," he said gently, "but he may serve some time in jail. Besides, I did dump the body, even if I did not kill him."

Rosina smiled.

"You are nearly always right, Logan," she leaned against him and felt the rumble of his laughter, "nearly."

"We should get married," he suggested. She smiled.

"Definitely," she agreed, "no more waiting. I can't stand it!"

A Surprise

The double wedding of both Monique and Hugh, Logan and Rosina had been set for February 24th. Their dresses were being made by professional seamstresses, which caused Maisie great relief. She had not been looking forward to all the sewing involved in making one wedding dress, never mind two. A week before the wedding Rosina sent her to do an errand for her in Dumbarton, and suggested that she take the carriage. Maisie was mystified, since she and Rosina always went shopping together, particularly for lace and fabric. Today she had to pick out a piece of cream lace for Rosina's nightdress, but was nervous of doing it on her own in case it was not to Rosina's liking. She was getting outside the carriage outside the shop and giving instructions to the driver about when to come and fetch her when she heard a deep, familiar voice.

"Maisie," it said.

She turned around and gasped.

"Findlay!" she cried. She gazed at him for a moment, then threw herself into his arms.

"How are you, Maisie?" he asked, kissing her softly.

"I am much better for seeing you," she replied lovingly, "how did you get here?"

"By boat," he replied, and took her arm, "where are you going?"

"The haberdashery," she pointed, "how did you know where to find me?"

"Rosina sent me a letter to tell me you were home the day she arrived

back. I answered straight away and portioned my duties out. I got here yesterday evening."

"Where have you been saying?"

"A little inn over by the waterside there," he pointed, "the wind rattles the windows dreadfully in the gale but it will do."

"I have to get the Mistress's lace," Maisie said anxiously "then we can talk."

He followed her into the shop and she grabbed just about the first piece of lace she saw, then went out into the wild windy day again. She laughed out of sheer happiness and he grabbed her around the waist, whirling her around, then kissed her till she was breathless. Afterward, he held her for a long while. At last, he said:

"*M*aisie?"

"Mmm?"

"It hasn't been much of an acquaintance or much of a separation, but will you marry me?"

She hugged him as tightly as she could, then said thoughtfully:

"If you had been a Mr McGillicuddy or a Mr McGonagle I might have thought twice, but I like the sound of Maisie Baxter, so I think I'll take a chance."

*H*e laughed.

"I like the sound of it too," he said, "you have made me so happy, Maisie."

"Where are we going to live though?" Maisie wondered anxiously, "I live here and you live away up there. I can't bear the thought of leaving my mistress but I can't bear the thought of losing you either."

"Your father and Laird Fraser have asked me to help run both their estates here," he replied, "I will be the assistant estate manager of

Hugh's estate and would take over some jobs at Logan's too. It suits me well because being the sole manager is a very stressful job!"

"*B*ut two estates?" she asked incredulously, "can you do it?"

"It will be hard work, but I wanted to ask you something," he took a deep breath, "you could be my assistant and still be near Rosina. You can do accounts, write letters and you are very good at talking to people. You are also good at organizing things. You would be a great help to me, Maisie."

"*I* would love it!" she said rapturously, "but where on the estate would we live?"

"Rosina says we can choose a suite of rooms in Dumbarton Castle," he replied, "which is the kind of accommodation where I lived in the Highlands."

Rosina put her hand over her mouth and shut her eyes.

"I cannot believe it!"

"If you do not mind being married with another two couples -"

Maisie gave a great whoop and clapped her hands.

"I would love it!" she cried, "but my dress -"

"Is all taken care of, my love!" Findlay kissed her again, tenderly, "now let's go home."



*W*hen they arrived at the castle Rosina and Hugh were waiting for them. Logan had gone back to his own estate to begin working again. In the winter there was always plenty of slaughtering, butchering and preparing of meat to be done, as well as maintenance and repair of all the farm implements.

"So," Rosina asked excitedly, "are we looking at the future Mr and Mrs Baxter?"

"Yes, Mistress," Maisie said joyfully.

"NOW you will call me Rosie!" she said sternly, "come - Father has opened a bottle of very good single malt. Let us drink a toast!"

Just as Hugh opened the bottle, Juliette came in, accompanied by Henri and Jacques, who were in very high spirits indeed. They had been out fishing, and described to the company in their ever-improving English how they had caught huge fishes and brought them home for supper.

"They wanted to bring them in but I would not let them," she laughed.

"Where is Monique?" Maisie asked, frowning, "I want to tell her our good news."

"She is sleeping," Juliette answered, "she has been sleeping for the last two hours. She is feeling a little unwell. I think it is best to leave her."

"She looked very pale," Hugh said anxiously. Juliette laughed.

"Do not worry Hugh - the mysteries of a woman's body should not concern you," Juliette's voice was light, but Hugh was still worried.

After the toast, he went upstairs to see Monique. He found her half-asleep and half-awake, and she gave him a drowsy smile as he came in.

"*Are* you all right?" he asked worriedly. She laughed.

"Of course I am," she answered, "Juliette and I had a hard ride this morning and I think it took it out of me. I'm fine, mon chère, don't worry."

"I feel like climbing in with you," he laughed, "we're about to have dinner and I am very, very hungry!" he pretended to bite the side of her neck like a vampire, "I could eat you up! Are you coming down?"

She yawned, stretching so that he could see the straining of her breasts against the fabric. He felt a surge of desire but fought it down.

Monique smiled.

"Shoo!" she said, flapping her hands at him, "I am coming now."

"Yes, Madam!" He jumped up, and went out, grinning. What a woman!



Logan was absent that night attending to estate duties, and Rosina missed him. Monique, Hugh, Juliette, Maisie, Findlay and the twins were all seated around the table, but the love of her life had gone to his own home to dine alone. It was a five-mile ride in the freezing darkness, so she consoled herself with the fact that she would see him next day, and picked at her food instead of eating it. Just as the plates were being cleared away the dining room door open and Logan strode in, bringing in with him the smell of fresh air.

"Logan!" Rosina ran to him, and he wrapped his arms around her, laughing. His eyes seemed particularly blue, and he looked happier than she had ever seen him.

"I thought I wouldn't see you tonight! What is that big smile for?" she asked.

He sighed, still smiling.

"Because I could not bear an evening without you," he replied, kissing her cheek, "I feel as though a weight has been lifted off my shoulders," he replied, "I didn't realize how much strain I had been under till I saw them taking Connor away."

Rosina's face clouded.

"He is just like his brother after all," she said scornfully, "I will be happier if I never see his face again!"

The Wedding

It must be terrible to be a woman, Logan thought as he watched bolts of multicolored silks, skeins of threads, samples of different shoes and thousands of silk flowers. Somehow he thought Rosina would be above all this fuss, but it seemed not. She was as susceptible to it as the next woman, and since she could afford to indulge herself and the other two brides he could not see the harm in it. He nearly tripped over one of the little seamstresses on her way to do some mysterious errand for Rosina. As he steadied her he could see that she looked terrified, probably because she was so tiny and he was so huge. He strode across the hallway and was intercepted by Hugh on his way to the parlor for a drink.

"I'm exhausted," Hugh said plaintively, "this wedding is killing me."

Logan clapped him on the back, laughing, and ordered some milk from a passing servant. They sat commiserating with each other for a while till Findlay came in and he chipped in with his catalog of grievances.

"Let them enjoy it," he said indulgently, "all we have to do is show up at the church looking smart, but for the lasses it's a big excuse to show off how beautiful they are," he topped up his whiskey glass and looked at Logan's milk. "will you not keep us company, Logan?"

Logan shook his head.

"Alas, I cannot," he smiled sadly, "in my youth I overindulged and now one glass is too many."

Findlay nodded understandingly and said no more. Presently all three of the ladies came in dressed for dinner. Monique had recovered from her stomach upset and was now her normal self.

"February the seventeenth," she said, sighing, "a whole week to go!"

"*You* will survive!" Hugh assured her, "then we will go on our honeymoon in the Trossachs and after that, you can come and be Lady Buchanan."

"*And* I will be Deputy Assistant Estate Manager of Dumbarton Castle," Maisie announced proudly.

"And I will be Lady Rosina Fraser!" Rosina sighed theatrically, "I sound like royalty!"

Logan went down on one knee.

"You are my Queen!" he said dramatically, then spoiled the moment by announcing: But I may be tempted to eat you if I don't get dinner very soon!"



*T*hree brides and three grooms stood in front of the minister in the small chapel of Dumbarton Castle. The congregation consisted of the aristocracy from miles around but the servants from both Dumbarton and Fraser castles had been invited to a feast of their own after the guests had finished.

It would be some years yet before Queen Victoria made white wedding dresses fashionable, so the brides were arrayed in beautiful jewel colors. Rosina was wearing rust with cream lace, Monique teal blue with black lace, and Annie deep maroon with gold lace. Juliette was wearing a deep lilac creation and caught the eye of many an eligible man as she sat in the front pew with her sons. The men looked proud and handsome in their clan kilts, claymores by their sides with tweed jackets and great silver brooches studded with Cairngorm stones.

The excitement in the air was palpable and there was a deafening cheer as the six newly-weds came out to a shower of rice which guests and servants alike were throwing from in copious amounts.

They all ducked, laughing into the great hall where the hailstorm of rice ceased and the grooms were able to kiss their brides in peace. They all congratulated each other then went into the wedding feast.

Logan had never really overcome his shyness about dealing with crowds of people, preferring his nearest and dearest, and Rosina could tell by his body language that he was starting to close in on himself. Fortunately Hugh was speaking for all of them.

Hugh clinked the side of his glass for attention.

"My Lairds, Ladies, and Gentleman!" He began, "they say that we Scots are mean and stingy. Well, that is true. Logan, Findlay and I contributed to a single wedding so we only had to feed each of you once!"

There was a general chorus of laughter and a few shouts of mock indignation before Hugh went on.

"But seriously, this is a very special occasion, since I have not only acquired a beautiful new wife but a new son-in-law," then he indicated Maisie and Findlay, "and Maisie, who has always been part of our family has a new spouse too. Please welcome Mr and Mrs Baxter!" There was a rousing chorus of cheers. "And my new sister-in-law Juliette and her sons Henri and Jacques, my new nephews."

"I know that my daughter is in the capable hands of Laird Logan Fraser - may God help him!" There was a ripple of laughter. "As for me, I count myself the most fortunate man alive - look at my gorgeous Monique!" Monique blushed, among more cheers accompanied by

much stamping of feet and tinkling of glasses. Hugh grinned and shouted:

"Eat, drink and be merry, my friends!"

The company needed no second bidding.

At the end of the evening they were exhausted, having shaken so many hands and said so many 'Thank Yous' that their throats were sore.

Monique, in particular, was again feeling tired and queasy. She had not eaten a thing throughout the feast and drunk nothing but a glass of wine mixed with water. They were standing outside listening to the sounds of merriment from the servants' hall and waving away the last guests when she caught her breath and clutched her stomach. Hugh was immediately by her side as she bent over, still holding on to herself and gasping.

"What is it, My Love?" His voice was panicky, "are you in pain? Tell us what is wrong."

Juliette managed to make her stand up, then took her hand away and gently felt the place where it had been.

"Mon Dieu! My God!" she cried.

Hugh was seriously alarmed now.

"What's wrong? Tell me, Juliette!" he was almost crying now.

But to his surprise, Juliette was laughing.

"Rien du tout, mon frère," she replied, "nothing at all my brother.

Feel."

Hugh put his hand on the place that Juliette had indicated and felt a barely perceptible tap-tap under his palm.

"Tu es enciente," Juliette said to her sister, "you are with child."

A rapid exchange of French followed between the two sisters with much gesticulating and shouting.

"It cannot be!" Monique cried, at last in English, "the doctors said -"

"The doctors were wrong, ma soeur," Juliette said fondly, "I have some experience of this condition!"

The tears were pouring down Hugh's face as he kissed his wife.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," he whispered to her.

"*They* call the first kicks 'the quickening'" Monique informed them, "I am sure that if it happens on a wedding day it is good luck."

The others crowded around to offer their congratulations but after a while, Hugh decided that Monique had had enough for one day. He swept her off her feet and carried her upstairs in his arms.

Afterglow

Monique lay down beside Hugh in the big bed and tucked her head into the hollow of his neck and shoulder. He kissed the top of her head and shook his head slowly.

"I cannot believe it," he said incredulously, "when will it be?"

"Neither can I," she smiled, "Juliette says that if I can feel the quickening I must be three months gone at least, so sometime in the summer, she says. Are you happy?"

"No," he said simply, "it is far too small a word. Now, let us sleep because you need your rest now. There are two of you."

"Oh no!" Monique leaned on her elbow to look down at him, "This is our wedding night, and we will not waste it sleeping!"

He looked at her incredulously for a moment then made a playful growl and rolled her over on her back. Then suddenly he stopped.

"I will not hurt the baby, will I?"

"Juliette says not," she assured him, "not right now, anyway."

"I'm so very glad," he said fervently.

He felt twenty years younger, a newly married man with a lovely youthful wife already carrying his child. Could his life be any better?"

Monique answered him kiss for kiss, and all thoughts of Connor were banished forever as she joyfully received him into her

body and tasted the bliss of true love.



Maisie was terrified. She had told Rosina the facts of life, but theory and practice were two different things, and now, when the moment had come she was trembling with a mixture of fear, anticipation, and desire. Tonight she would become Findlay's wife, with all that that entailed, and she wondered how ready she was. She had never wanted a maid, so she began to undo her elegant coiffure by herself before she felt the gentle touch of Findlay's hands on her neck pulling out the pins for her and gently teasing out the coils. After a few moments he took away his fingers and replaced them with his lips, bestowing soft teasing kisses on her that made her begin to ache with desire. Then he sat her down at her dressing table while he brushed her hair with long, careful strokes that made her scalp tingle deliciously. She looked at his reflection in the mirror and he smiled at her fondly.

"All right, lass?" he asked.

"Perfect, thank you, Finn," she smiled back. After a few more strokes he put the brush down and pulled her into his arms. He held her for a long time till her heart was racing and she could hardly stand the waiting. She pulled away from him and began to unlace her dress. He helped her then pulled it off her shoulders with her petticoat, caressing her shoulders. He made her sit down while he peeled off her stockings. She submitted mutely. This was what she had always dreamed of - being adored by a man she loved as much as life itself.

Then she hitched herself onto the bed and lay naked while she watched him undress. She did not feel frightened anymore. Instead, she felt lustful, wanton and free, as if she had shaken off the chains of propriety and good manners. Now it was only the two of them, animals in their warm den. She watched Findlay undress and smiled.

Everything was going to be all right now.

He lay down on the bed beside her and took her in his arms then kissed her gently, brushing back the dark hair from her brow.

"I love you, Margaret MacLeod Baxter," he said, and his voice was soft and thick with desire.

"I didn't know what it meant till I met you, she whispered, trailing her lips down the column of his neck. He moaned in pleasure till she peeled off his eye patch.

"No," he said, his voiced a panicked whimper.

"Sssh," she said gently, kissing the puckered skin of the empty eye socket, "I love you - all of you - even this."

He had wanted their first time to be gentle, and it was. Maisie's desire had made her ready for him, and when he entered her there was almost no pain. She clung to him as they moved together and presently a feeling of pleasure she could never have imagined swept over her again and again till it subsided, leaving her sated and warm. Findlay lay beside her with his arm flung around her waist.

"How are you, Maisie?" he asked tenderly.

"I feel as if I have just found heaven," she replied, rapturously.

"Good, because I would not have done my duty properly otherwise."

"I will make sure you do it every day," she giggled.



"*I* can't believe it!" Rosina said incredulously as Logan slowly peeled off her garments. Usually, she was afire for him by this time but she was so taken up with thinking about her father and Monique that she could hardly tear her thoughts away from them," after all this time I am going to have a sister or brother!" Logan took her by the chin and turned her face around to his, frowning.

"*W*ife," he said firmly, "if you are so fascinated by someone else's pregnancy maybe you should work on one of your own?"

Rosina's laugh was smothered by his passionate kiss and in a few moments she had forgotten about everything except her desperate need for Logan. They had been in separate bedchambers and separate castles for two weeks, and now they had a fierce hunger that needed to be satisfied. Rosina loved the feeling of Logan's skin rubbing against hers, and the play of his hard muscles as he moved against her. And he rejoiced in the softness of her breasts, her smooth skin, and the cry she made when they both reached fulfilment. Afterwards, they lay, sleepy and contented, sated with love.

"*G*oodnight Lady Fraser," he murmured.

"Goodnight, Husband," she replied. Then she opened her eyes again.

"Logan?"

"Rosie?" his tone was slightly irritable.

"If we have a boy, can we call him Hugh?"

Logan sighed.

"We have yet to conceive him - or her," he pointed out.

"Yes, but what if -"

"Rosie?"

"Yes, Logan?"

"Shut up!" he turned his back on her, but he was smiling. Rosina put

her arm around his waist and pulled him close. They fell asleep in seconds.



So three very happy couples went to bed that night, and while the snow fell and the wind howled outside, they went to sleep in each others' arms, kept warm by cocoons of love.